

Miss America is No Ideal: The Repercussions of One Beauty

Author: Alicia Rodriguez Battistoni

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/3068>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2013

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.

Boston College

Miss America is No Ideal

The Repercussions of One Beauty

By: Alicia Rodriguez Battistoni



Advisor: Dr. Lisa Cuklanz

In fulfillment of the Communication Honors Program
May 7th 2013

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to a number of people. First and foremost, I dedicate this to my advisor, Dr. Cuklanz. Thank you for taking the time to carefully comb through my work and for putting up with some of my procrastinating tendencies. You are an amazing mentor and the inspiration to my interest in Women's Studies.

I would not be at Boston College if it were not for my incredible, supportive, and loving parents. Thank you Mom and Dad for motivating me to do my best and always believing in me. Everything I do in school, and in life, has always and will always be for you. I love you both so much!

And finally, I would like to dedicate this paper to my roommates. Laura, Christie, Tara, Becca, and Claudia, thank you all for humoring my various rants about why pageants are ruining women. Thank you for never being dismissive of my work and always engaging me in great conversations. You all are the loves of my life and great motivators.

Abstract

There are strict rules and expectations that govern the world's idea of femininity and beauty. What are the repercussions of selecting one type of beauty to be ideal on a global scale? After watching the pageant and reading previous scholars' findings, I argue that the Miss America Pageant presents its participants as women to be admired while its practices objectify women's bodies. Several myths dictate how contestants should behave and historically diversity has failed to break into the pageant. On a global scale, Miss America has inspired other international beauty pageants, causing countries to compete with one another for the most beautiful woman. Selecting one beauty often times is based purely on appearance, like body type or racial characteristics. The implications of one beauty means that all women, all over the world, feel compelled to meet the standards set by this one beauty, this winner. In turn, women who do not measure up feel inadequate and strive to change their appearances to meet the mold. This model also homogenizes the concept of beauty that previously was diverse and culturally based. Pageants, like Miss America, therefore encourage women to objectify themselves in order to meet an international beauty standard that is historically based on white or western appearances.

Introduction

The Miss America Pageant has been a staple in American culture for nearly a century. Over eighty girls have been crowned the winner and have reigned as the country's ideal woman. While nearly everyone in the United States is familiar with the pageant, very few people know how it came to be. Originally, business owners designed the pageant as an attraction to bring in and keep consumers in Atlantic City. The idea was to have a "a week long event one week after Labor Day to extend the Labor Day Weekend, and thereby benefit the smaller side avenue hotels not on the Boardwalk" (Riverol "Live" 12). The Miss America Pageant's initial birth had more to do with making money than beauty and was a ploy to bring in more profits for business owners. Regardless of how the pageant came to be, its success did not initially take off in its first few years. In fact, "as of 1927, it appeared that in all likelihood, the Atlantic City pageant, and perhaps pageants in general would cease to exist as a mainstream form of entertainment" (Riverol "Live" 25).

The pageant lay dormant for eight years until a woman named Lenora Slaughter revived it in 1935 during the Great Depression (Riverol “Live” 31). Within four years, more seats were added to accommodate audiences, contestants complied with stricter regulations, the talent competition entered the contest, and the first Miss Congeniality Award was given (Riverol “Live” 31). By 1957 CBS had telecast the pageant and by the following year its telecast was two hours long. Little by little over the years, the pageant grew in size and fame. The Miss America Pageant, though full of interesting history, may seem like a silly practice to analyze and critique. I believe that it is important to look at this contest because it holds critical social importance; it defines and upholds gender roles and stereotypes. The Miss America Pageant’s contestants compete to represent their states and ideally to be crowned winner to represent the nation. But this whole concept of representation is complicated when race comes into play, because as history will show, the Miss America Organization does not treat all races equally. The pageant is an important part of American culture to study because controversy can surround it constantly.

The Miss America Organization claims to be “the world’s largest provider of scholarship assistance for young women” and strives to promote women as leaders throughout the nation (MAO). The goal and mission seem very noble, the organization providing young women the opportunity to voice their ideas, opinions, and talents to the country. The organization likes to emphasize that its contestants are students in college, graduate school, or are using Miss America scholarships to educate themselves even further. It maintains that the pageant has empowered women for decades giving them a voice and that it has empowered them through scholarship assistance of more than

\$45,000,000. While the Miss America Organization clearly promotes itself as an advocate and supporter of women, the pageant itself must be analyzed through a critical lens that does not simply look at what the organization physically offers its contestants, but rather the images and ideas it offers the American public.

First and foremost, the pageant offers its winners as role models, women who others should emulate in order to be superior or a “winner.” Yet there are stringent rules regulating which women are allowed to compete. For example, to be eligible, contestants must be unmarried with no children and are disqualified if they have ever had an abortion in the past. These rules paint a clear picture of what American women are expected to be, or at least women worthy of a crown and scholarship money. The women who *do* meet the organization’s standards present their platforms to the public during the competition. These platforms have the power to set the agenda of what Americans will think about and what issues are relevant. Because the contestants act as role models, the issues they select as important then become important to the people who look up to them.

The pageant is problematic due to its focus on women’s bodies as objects to be scrutinized and judged. As a result, women see their bodies as needing repair or alterations, thus leading to plastic surgery and other cosmetic products in order to better fit the mold of beauty presented by the pageant. The pageant’s rules hesitantly permit plastic surgery but the organization encourages contestants not to alter their natural beauty (Slate). Many myths also arise within the pageant that cast passive women as the ideal, emphasizing beauty as a tool. In many cases, the myths the pageant teaches restrict women to a gender role that binds women to a set of characteristics and expectations, inhibiting progress in the movement for equality.

Lastly, the Miss America Pageant has sparked a number of problems in regards to race and diversity. For years the pageant excluded women of color and even after their inclusion, the majority of Miss Americas have been white. The winner, regardless of race, always seems to have the same characteristics, whether it is a thin small nose, circular eyes, smooth hair, etc.; the winner always has stereotypically *white* physical characteristics. The repetition of white as beautiful in the pageant hurts the self-esteem of women of color and also has farther-reaching repercussions. On a global level, other countries have adapted the concept of pageants, and many countries compete with one another in international pageants. As a result, one woman reigns as beauty of the world, setting a standard for all women, regardless of race, religion, or culture to follow. As to be expected, having one winner causes cultures to conform their beauty ideals to the dominant one.

In this essay, I argue that the Miss America Pageant presents objectified women as role models with platforms who perpetuate various myths and white beauty ideals that homogenize non-western beauties. Although there is so much to look at within the construction of the pageant, there are several issues that seem most critical to address. The first is how the contestants are simultaneously objectified by the pageant while women idolize them. The contestants uphold several myths, most importantly the princess myth, emphasizing beauty and passivity. The pageant has had a long and turbulent relationship with race, as white rules supreme over others. Lastly, the globalization of beauty has caused the wide scope of diverse beauty to rapidly narrow.

The scope of this thesis will begin by discussing the pageant from its early days in the 1920s moving on to discuss how the contestants have defined beauty standards for

years. While this paper overall argues that the pageant is harmful for women, it also brings in alternative opinions that support the pageant, highlighting its benefits and positive outcomes. Another focus will be the objectification of women that is so deeply woven into the pageant and its practices. A major component to my argument against the pageant is that it enables princess myths to promote traditional gender roles in the United States. I will go over which myths are detrimental and why, as well as discuss race. Given the pageant's history with minorities, I will give background information on how the pageant used to treat them, and how the pageant has tried to better its relationship with minority contestants. On a global level, I will look at other pageants like Miss World and Miss Universe in which many countries send their national winner to compete for a title. These components are all connected because when the contestants are role models for women, young girls emulate their behavior, like following princess myths and objectifying one's body. The emulation of pageant culture hurts minorities because the beauty ideals perpetuated by the Miss America Pageant exclude women of color and as a result, women all around the world are sacrificing their unique beauty ideals to follow the white hegemonic image perpetuated by beauty pageants.

Methods

In order to look at the Miss America Pageant first hand I went directly to their YouTube channel. Here, the organization itself had posted 56 different videos. In total, the Miss America Organization YouTube channel has 437 videos organized into 16 playlists based on chronological order. The most recent playlist is the announcement

of Miss America 2013, Mallory Hagan, and her following press conference. The 2013 pageant has its own playlists with 15 videos totaling five hours and sixteen minutes.

In order to research the pageant and see it exactly how it presents itself, I watched the most recent pageant, Miss America 2013. The video starts at the final night of the competition. All 53 contestants introduce themselves and their states briefly, before fading back into the synchronized group dance. After the judges are introduced, nearly two thirds of the contestants are eliminated, as only the top fifteen move on to compete. The top contestants then parade out in bikinis and stilettos to the sound of pounding electric music, flexing their chiseled abs and lanky legs. Meanwhile, the “losers,” are required to sit on stage and watch the remainder of the entire pageant.

The next section is the formal wear, and contestants emerge looking like princesses in elegant floor length gowns. Each individual walks the length of the runway, showing off her elegant dress. With a full shimmering face of makeup and picture perfect hair, the contestants look like life sized Barbie dolls. After these two modeling sessions, the pageant moves into the talent portion. The top 15 are seated ready to be called up at random to perform, further putting the girls on their toes. The host calls each girl forward to perform one at a time, and each time the contestant is surprised, anxious, and yet thankful. The contestants appear hysterically happy when called because of the 15 contestants on stage, only ten are called up to perform. The five women whom the host does not call do not perform and are instead eliminated. In this way, they are eliminated simply based off their appearance because during the previous two sections of the competition the contestants do not speak; they simply wear a bikini and gown.

The top ten talents included baton twirling, singing, contemporary dance, tap dancing, piano playing, opera singing, more tap dancing, more piano playing, even MORE tap dancing, and more singing. In many of the singing performances, the contestants did not seem particularly talented. In fact, one even butchered the moving climatic song “I Dreamed a Dream” from *Les Misérables*. From the ten finalists, only five are asked questions by the judges; the other five are eliminated. It is interesting that the interview section comes last in the pageant, when the fewest number of contestants are present. In this way, only five women have a voice in the pageant, and their answers are severely limited by a strict time limit. This section is the last portion of the competition in which contestants are judged. Again, the host calls a girl up at random and the judges ask questions about politics and the media. The final five all stand hand in hand as the host announces final results. One by one, the announcer eliminates contestants, announcing each of the runner-ups until he declares Miss New York the new Miss America. She cries as Miss America 2012 enters and hugs her. Miss America 2012 places the tiara and sash on her successor before handing her an enormous bouquet of roses and slinking off to the side. As the hosts close up the show, the other contestants rush in to hug her, the ones on the far sides awkwardly trying to congratulate her in a crowd of 50 women who have just lost. This strange and emblematic scene is not new to the pageant, and crowds of losers have politely congratulated the winner for many years.

PBS produced a documentary called *Miss America* that tracks the beauty contest throughout its history starting with its first year in 1921 up until the 2000 pageant. On its website, PBS has a video archive with clips from pageants from years past. There were four categories of video: Questions & Answers, Crowning the Queen, Pageant Newsreels,

and Talents Exposed. While the number of videos per category varied, I picked the first and last video from each category to watch. My reasoning was to see the earliest footage possible of each section and compare it to the latest, enabling me to see the changes that have transformed the pageant over the years.

In my analysis of the Miss America Pageant, I will be using several concepts from scholars' prior theories. The first is the myth of the perfect girl, or the princess myth. According to Henke, the perfect girl is flawless; she is "the girl who has no bad thoughts or feelings, the kind of person everyone wants to be with, the girl who, in her perfection, is worthy of praise and attention, worthy of inclusion and love...who speaks quietly, calmly, who is always nice and kind, never mean or bossy" (Henke 231). This image is completely fictional because in the real world, girls get angry and want to speak loudly and no girl is calm at all times, no *person* is calm all the time. This myth drives a good portion of female behaviors as women try to mask any imperfection, internalizing all negative feelings that slowly eat away at them. Another concept that came up in my research was the beauty ideal. Although beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder, different cultures cherish different traits of women. In the United States and western culture, there is an image of beauty that sets the standard for women to meet. According to Kinloch, "the epitome of western beauty" is "being tall with long limbs, golden skin, and long hair" (Kinloch 94). This ideal of beauty excludes black women especially and assumes that white is beautiful; logically implying anyone who is not white is *not* beautiful.

Cinderella, while a popular Disney princess and fairy tale, is also a key term for this essay. The story of Cinderella, a strikingly beautiful young woman, has ties to the

Miss America Pageant making it an important story to note. Cinderella initially is dressed in rags doing grueling housework until her fairy godmother gives her a ball gown and glass slippers. It is only when she is flawless in appearance that the prince falls in love with her. Although Cinderella is supposed to be loved for her kindness and good heart, the description of her unfathomable beauty seems to overshadow her great personality. Also important to note, the prince did not fall in love with her when she appeared ragged and tattered but only when she was dressed up. This story is similar to the pageant in that supposedly ordinary girls are dressed up like princesses and fight for a crown and title.

A more technical key term in one of the articles is the waist-to-hip ratio. WHR measures the waist and hip circumferences and computes a ratio that reflects “both the distribution of fat between upper and lower body and relative amount of intra- versus extra-abdominal fat” (Singh 294). In the study, these numbers are used to gauge women’s attractiveness based on her waist and hip sizes. This term is important because the study analyzes the WHR of Miss America contestants and how the measurements have fared over the years. One final term is the powwow princess who, unlike Miss America, is not selected based on her physical appearance but rather “community identity, ritual efficacy, achievement, and representation” (Roberts 273).

The practice of “disease mongering” is another term used by scholars in discussions of globalization. This term technically means the spread of fear in regards to a weakness found in science. In the context of Miss America, disease mongering is found outside the United States. The ideals and beauty images that the pageant promotes within the United States sets what is perceived as “normal” and acceptable for physical appearances, so when women in other countries do not match this western image, disease

mongering occurs. As a result, those who do not look racially or physically similar to Western ideals are perceived as “weaker” or worse off, and thereby take action to remedy this.

Literature Review

Pageant Practices

The Miss America Pageant has dealt with a plethora of issues throughout the years like its relationship with minorities, amending rules, feminist criticism, and more. Although the pageant has positive repercussions in certain ways, it also objectifies its participants and aggressively shapes beauty ideals in the United States. An article from the “Christian Science Monitor” (Zipp and Teicher 1999) refers to the pageant as a practice of the past, an outdated contest that represents the culture of the 1970s and 80s. Emphasizing the importance of purity and beauty, the pageant reinforces America’s traditional values. In order to be a contestant in the pageant, women are required to never have been married or pregnant. While the organization proposed changing these rules, the state pageants all voted against opening up the pageant to more women. In giving their reasons as to why they voted against the amendments, state pageants said that the contest is founded on an ideal, insinuating that being divorced or having an abortion goes against that ideal. Overall, the author concludes that perhaps the pageant’s waning popularity has to do with the relationship between beauty and sex. In the past, as shown by the pageant, beauty was “divorced” from sexuality, seeking out only pure contestants. However, on TV today and in the media, sex and beauty are very much intertwined, causing the pageant and its rules to seem outdated.

After these changes were proposed to the pageant, Michael Callahan discussed the future of Miss America and her current role. He points out that the Miss America today is a very different one from the past. She is a more realistic young woman in our society, one who is more intelligent and modern and less artificial (Callahan). The cornerstone of the pageant has always been the ideal of virtue, being a role model for little girls. While even some of the contestants criticize the swimsuit portion of the pageant, they still acknowledge that the Miss America Organization gives millions in grants to women for scholarships, even to those who do not end up competing. While the organization boasts of its scholarships, the true representation of the pageant is “purity.” As the winner of Miss North Dakota 1998, Sonja Modesti says, “my responsibility as a state titleholder within the Miss America Organization was to be a voice committed to the public dialogue” (Modesti 225). She believes that once a contestant wins her title, she becomes an orator and must perform public addresses. Because the organization provides scholarships, it encourages its participants to be role models and, in some forums, orators.

In 1988, a registered nurse won Miss America, garnering positive and negative reactions. On one side, the image of a nurse reinforces the stereotype of women as handmaids in a sense, but on the other, it offers the winner the chance to promote nursing. The winner herself, Kaye Lani Rae Rafko, believed that the pageant is a positive contest, one not focused on sole appearance (Collins). Though many winners of Miss America use their fame to break into show business, Rafko instead wanted to return to nursing, stating that nurses are equal to doctors. Another Miss America winner similarly used her status in the public eye for good.

The 70th Miss America, Debbye Turner, was the first to have an official platform: “Motivating Youth to Excellence.” After her win, Turner’s “public speaking engagements during the next few years...propelled her participation with families, communities and mentoring programs” (Frabotta 2005). Even after her reign, she continued to be a keynote speaker and bolster the veterinary profession. Overall her goal was to increase diversity of gender and ethnicity within the profession. Another scholar also believes in the importance and benefits of the pageant. Jill Neimark concedes that while the pageant has many characteristics its home city, like corruption, it has also adapted to be more progressive with the times. Diverse winners have been black, handicapped, or Jewish, and the platforms the women compete with cover a wide range of important issues. Neimark goes as far as citing a poet who argues that the Miss America Pageant inspired the women’s movement since feminists staged protests against it. In fact, as a country the United States uses Miss America to learn about itself. Overall, the pageant acts as a mirror of the country; it has in the past, and it will continue to do so in the future.

Tonn discusses how she idealized Miss America in 1968 because the winner was from her own home state. Miss America served as an inspiration and a goal to achieve, a new standing for women. “Through Barnes I entertained the subversive possibility of female mobility—higher education, travel, perhaps professional opportunity, and exposure to diverse intriguing people—that had appeared beyond my reach” (Tonn 150). For more conservative towns and areas, Miss America was revolutionary because she was an independent confident woman. Many argue that Miss America can inspire girls who don’t believe in themselves to think they can achieve great success through

pageants. A magazine reporter closely followed a recent winner on her public appearances to get a better understanding of who Miss America is.

Teresa Scanlan is the youngest Miss America in 74 years at age 17 and keeps a very busy schedule visiting with American soldiers and CEOs. Despite Scanlan's full schedule, the pageant's popularity has substantially decreased, from 85 million viewers to 2.7 million in 2007 (Young). Scanlan sets a good example by discussing her aspirations of becoming a congresswoman and then president, but the public typically recognizes winners as poor role models in terms of furthering women in society.

The Miss America Pageant is the oldest and best-known beauty contest in the country, but there are also beauty contests in a higher education setting. In the past, becoming "student queen" on campus was the greatest source of prestige available to college women. Because the participants in college pageants are numerous, the contests become areas for exploring gender, sexuality, race, class, etc. College-based beauty pageants can "maintain and sometimes challenge gender, class, and race hierarchies" (Tice 254). Despite this fact, she condemns the pageants for judging women based on how their bodies look and how they meet hegemonic expectations. The fact that colleges call beauty an achievement is troubling.

Jennifer Jones similarly argues against the pageant in that all the different Misses, like Miss America, Miss USA, Miss Universe, etc. construct a feminine ideal that objectifies women as it encourages them to compete against each other rather than support one another; sisterhood is lost in the competition. She likens the pageant to a battle in which bodies, faces, and charm are weapons. Women are sacrificial in the pageant because Miss America is forever young, and a new one dethrones the current one

every year, sacrificing the older winner for a younger one. Unlike male relationships, the pageant shows that women are not expected to pass on traditions and work together, but rather work against their predecessors. The objectification of women and the construction of a beauty ideal are clearly present in the pageant, as they are in other American media.

As the media highlights the importance of being thin and fit, men and women grow distorted body images and destructive eating habits. When specifically examining magazine exposure, researchers Morry and Staska found that beauty magazines cause women to internalize self-objectification and societal ideals. The results of the study showed that men and women today are dissatisfied with their bodies as a result of the media's focus on women's thinness and men's physical fitness. Overall, the media exposure people undergo impacts their body image and the media shapes what ideal bodies look like.

Studying encoding in magazine advertisements, Ashmore, Englis, and Solomon examine the concepts of beauty as multidimensional by cultural definitions. They define a beauty ideal as "an overall 'look' incorporating both physical features... and a variety of products, services, and activities" (50). Throughout history, beauty ideals have had two main effects: linking women's appearances with their self-worth, and selling products to men and women. Studies have proved that attractiveness matters, that attractive people are more successful and better liked. Some researchers believe that there are inborn perceptions of what is beautiful, but the authors argue that beauty is culturally based on social experiences.

Research from Grabe, Ward, and Hyde examines the link between women's body image and mass media. The question tested is whether or not exposure to mass media that

depicts a thin body ideal causes body image disturbance in women. When calculating the mean effect size, the researchers found “the relation between media exposure and body dissatisfaction was -0.28 ” indicating that “overall, media exposure is associated with decreased levels of body satisfaction for women” (Grabe, Ward, and Hyde 469). This is an important fact because 50% of girls and undergraduate women are dissatisfied with their bodies, arguably caused by mass media, and these feelings can be linked with mental and physical problems. Miss America is relevant here because the contestants in the pageant have become increasingly thinner over the years and teach this ideal of beauty to girls, an ideal of thinness.

In Singh’s study, the author looks at how beauty is judged based on women’s waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) with results indicating men are more attracted to women with lower WHR. For Western society, the definition of attractiveness and the ideal of beauty have been inferred from select samples like Playboy centerfolds, fashion magazine models, and Miss America contestants. In one of the studies, the researcher “examines the bodily features and WHR changes in the same groups, namely, Playboy centerfolds and Miss America contest winners, as used in previous studies to identify changing criteria for female attractiveness” (Singh 296). The findings indicate that from 1940-1985 the body type of Miss America contestants has remained the hourglass shape instead of becoming tubular the way Playboy centerfolds have. Also Miss America contestants’ hips’ and waists’ measurements decreased while breast measurements increased. The data also proved that there was a clear trend toward slenderness for the contestants shown by their decreasing percentage of ideal weight. The second part of the study looked at how men ranked women’s attractiveness with WHR as the dependent variable. The data

indicated that “figures with the lowest WHR were rated as most attractive, and as WHR increased, the attractiveness rating decreased” (Singh 298).

Expanding upon Singh’s study, Freese and Meland examine the evolution of the waist-to-hip ratios of Playboy models and Miss America winners. Examining numerical data, their study reexamines Singh’s results, finding that the variation in waist-to-hip ratios was greater than reported. These studies are important because they determine what body images are considered beautiful in the United States which in turn drive people to make important decisions about their body. One could argue that the pageant’s definition of a beautiful body influences cosmetic surgery practices. As seen from Grabe, Ward, and Hyde’s study, the images in the media women see influence their body satisfaction. So when mass media, like the Miss America Pageant, depicts unhealthy skinny women being crowned winner, women may feel the need to alter their bodies to meet this ideal.

Simone Oliver discusses the prevalence of cosmetic procedures in the United States and how this practice affects the country’s perception of beauty. At an exhibition in Los Angeles, 175 images are on display showing a variety of photos from glamour shots to needles in skin, juxtaposing beauty with the ugly aspects that come with it. The goal of the exhibition was to make people think about what they consider beautiful, why they think this way, what is human nature, and what is due to the media. Also critiquing cosmetic surgery, Tice and Weber criticize Fox’s show “The Swan” because it sends the message that women are not beautiful the way they are, and that dieting and mass amounts of plastic surgery will in a sense, “fix” them. Only at the end of the show, after going through multiple procedures is the woman “pageant worthy.” Women are manufactured, cut up, and sewn together to meet this ideal publicized through the

pageant. “The Swan,” like Miss America, pushes the same beauty image, thin, white, heterosexual, to audiences. The repercussions of this message are detrimental because both programs dictate what is beautiful, and implicitly what is *not* beautiful. The authors repeatedly discuss race and class images in the show as well as beauty ideals.

Pageant Myths

Fairy Tale Princess

Miss America is often referred to as a princess; she embodies beauty and grace. In fact, she has striking similarities to the characters from myths and fairy tales. Anuakan critiques how the pageant, like fairy tales, creates an ideal womanhood that girls try to conform to. Girls who do not fit the princess mold are meant to feel like outsiders and they are mentally scarred by the fact that society pushes the princess ideal on them and holds them accountable when they do not measure up. The myth of the princess/perfect girl demands that women be blonde, innocent, and most importantly passive. Heroines seem homogenous in their appearance and depend on men for security and protection. In today’s culture, “beauty pageants are one of the human forums in which girls become true-to-life princesses” (Anuakan 116). Women in fairy tales with power are *never* the princess or heroine; they are instead the villainous sorceress or witch. With this imagery, fairy tales perpetuate a stereotype that powerful women are evil while passive helpless women are good. The final dangerous myth in the article is that of the feminine power of seduction that says femininity can be used as a tool to reach goals. Instead of women thinking through problems and working hard, they can use their good looks to get their way.

Watson and Darcy further the discussion of princesses like Cinderella and how she is related to the Miss America Pageant. The authors draw a comparison between Disney's Cinderella and the Miss America Pageant saying that Miss America crown could easily be exchanged for the glass slipper. In both texts there is an "innate 'exclusionary' quality of beauty, 'attainable only by the few'" (Watson 116). The Cinderella story teaches audiences that working in her dirty clothes, Cinderella gets nowhere, but once she is dressed for the ball she can achieve so much more. One scholar says, "Even the most naïve child knows intuitively that Cinderella could never have been loved by the prince while dressed in rags. The hidden message, clearly heard by children and adults alike, is that packaging counts, no matter how worthy the inner woman" (Watson 117). While Tautz critically examines notable Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek's work, the topic of "princess myths" comes up again and again. She says that Jelinek scrutinizes the popularity of princess myths by rewriting *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*. In these new versions, the victims in the stories are women suffering from men's power and are trapped in their gender ideals.

Discussing figures like Princess Diana and JonBenet Ramsey, Michelle Cottle analyzes the myths and fairy tales that influence the way women and girls think. She argues that fairy tales cause women to believe deep down that a prince will come and rescue them. This myth contributes to the reason that females are fascinated with beauty queens like Miss America because they manifest the desire to be a princess and find their prince. The author concedes that it is okay to want to be beautiful and concerned about appearance, but it is also important to remember the importance of equality and

intelligence. Although princesses are closely tied to the pageant, scholars often compare Miss America contestants to characters from the film *The Stepford Wives*.

Plastic Women

Dow's article discusses the film *The Stepford Wives* and how the issues it raises relate to the pageant. She brings up that feminists accused the pageant of promoting "an ideal of women as plastic, doll-like, submissive sex objects who are paraded in swimsuits for the pleasure of men" (Dow 128). The problems feminists had with the pageant was that it objectified and exploited the women who participated while it taught audiences that beauty is more valuable than brains, going as far to say "that beauty could compensate for a lack of other, more substantive qualities" (Dow 143). Dow criticizes the "romantic mythology of individualism" that controls narrative in the US so much so that the media has actually cast Miss America contestants as poster children for feminism.

Using the medium, "The Stepford Wives" as a jumping off point, Catherine Orenstein discusses how far women have progressed by having careers and demanding equality within and outside of the home. Despite such progress, women still internalize parts of Stepford and force strict conforming definitions of beauty and femininity upon themselves. These beauty ideals go beyond just being healthy and in some cases are built around plastic surgery. Women crave an ideal version of themselves and fall prey to the Cinderella Cycle: a transformation of a heroine from being plain to powerful involving a make over. This desire to transform one's image is seen as one's desire to be loved and seen as beautiful. The princess myth and connection to Stepford are common points of discussion for the pageant. A.R. Riverol, however, expands the analysis of myths in the

pageant from being all about princesses and focuses on the myths surrounding the actual contestants.

Riverol's article covers a variety of myths. The first is the Myth of the All-American Amateur. The idea here is that a new girl wins the title of Miss America each year because the country would never tolerate a professional beauty queen since she would be considered greedy and vain. Part of the appeal of the contestants is that they are "anybodys." The second myth is the Myth of the Girl Next Door. While people think a contestant is just a regular girl, she is not the girl from down the street; she's a "seasoned veteran" (Riverol 213). Any real "girl next door" would be eliminated at the local or state level. The girls who compete in Atlantic City have competed in numerous pageants and are NOT the girl next door. The third myth is the Myth of the Perfect "10". While girls receive marks like 7.1 for poise, it is impossible for judges to measure something as intangible as beauty. The Natural Look is the fourth myth because many girls have changed their faces and bodies through plastic surgery. They "Vaseline their lips and teeth, tape their breasts for cleavage, and cinch their wastes for that hourglass figure" (Riverol 215).

Diversity in the Pageant

The Color of Miss America

Miss America has a very tumultuous relationship with race and diversity based on her early history teeming with discrimination. During the 1950s, white beauty reigned supreme, and black women were excluded from the beauty ideal of America. "There were no Black models in commercial advertisements or on the pages of fashion magazines, and Black women were barred from entering state and national beauty

pageants” (Ebony). Racist exclusion caused blacks to put on their own events, advertisements, and pageants. The first Miss Black America was crowned in 1968 and it wasn’t until 1984 that a black woman won Miss America. Overall, at times when segregation still persisted in American society, blacks, although characterized as an out-group, still celebrated their own unique beauty until being brought into the mainstream pageant years later.

Kinloch starts her article by asking how the Miss America Organization can promote Americanness while it lacks diversity in its racial composition. She moves on to discuss beauty ideals in the United States today and how there is a struggle for black women to feel beautiful when “whiteness” determines the ideal beauty standard in society. It is the ideal of western beauty that bombards women of all races everyday in commercials, ads, movies, magazines, and other forms of media. The emphasis on western beauty as an ideal puts down and demoralizes other beauties, like that of black women. It seems irrelevant how many times black women hear “black is beautiful” because American standards of beauty will always say otherwise, evidenced by a lack of black Miss Americas in the pageant’s history.

Overall Kinloch’s article touches on many different aspects of race within the pageant. It covers the exclusion of blacks from the pageant that lasted fifty years, as well as the white supremacist attitude connected to the Miss America Pageant for years. Kinloch addresses the widely accepted ideal of beauty as being white while black women are told that they are not naturally beautiful. She argues that white supremacy functions on fear, and in this case it feeds on the fear of black people who believe that their bodies and intellect are inferior compared to whites’. The article finishes with a strong

discussion of the case of Vanessa Williams and her presence in the virgin and sexual world and how this contradiction lost her everything.

Sarah Banet-Weiser continues the discussion of blacks in the pageant. She writes that blacks appeared in the contest as slaves in musical numbers in the early years of the pageant while black women were barred from actually being contestants. Even when a black woman won the entire pageant, her victory was seen by many as purely a political move on behalf of the organization while white winners supposedly won based on their merit. Banet-Weiser argues that the Miss America Pageant has been political since the very start, political in its initial exclusion of blacks and political in its attempt to later include blacks. She also criticizes that society was so quick to forget the decades of racism perpetuated by the pageant as soon as Williams won; the fact that one black woman won Miss America was enough to erase the pageant's history as a racist production. When black contestants try to preach that "black is beautiful," this is only considered true when it corresponds to the traditional white model of beauty. The author argues that when black women are contestants, they must try to "pass for women" (Banet-Weiser 130). Even Williams had to "pass" as white and was expected to reign as a "colorless" Miss America, in other words reigning as a white Miss America, for white is the absence of color.

Between 1945 and 1980, the beauty industry and globalization grew significantly and a particular beauty ideal began to dominate the United States. Beauty ideals for women "had become widely diffused worldwide, including a lack of body [odor], white natural teeth, slim figures, paler skins, and rounder eyes. Beauty companies" and "beauty pageants...shaped this process" (G. Jones "Blonde" 150). Since 1921, more than a third

of Miss America contestants were blonde, and blonde Barbie dolls dominated the market until the 80s while only a small fraction of Americans are blond. Studies indicate that blonde and blue-eyed has been the standard of beauty for decades, excluding women of color from the American ideal. Because black women and other non-whites are unable to meet this standard, they are made to feel less than whites, and the image perpetuated by the pageant weighs heavily down on the confidence and self-esteem of women who racially do not look like Miss America. This has been the immediate effect in the United States on American women, but the pageant has far reaching effects beyond imagination.

Geoffrey Jones also examines the effects of globalization looking through the beauty industry lens. He says the homogenization of global beauty struck in the 19th century, continuing up to the present day. The most interesting part of his article is that homogenized beauty is part of a process in which businesses turn societal values into brands, therefore changing the perception of beauty. Despite the rise of globalization, the homogenization of multiple beauty ideals into one still incorporates more diverse ideals bringing in groups that may have been previously excluded. In this way, globalization has some benefits in that it incorporates other views into the construction of beauty.

Diversity of Pageants

Miss World, an international pageant, focuses on national and cultural identity, combining the frivolous with the serious for a unique viewing experience. The event itself displays countries with delayed or advanced entry into modernity; it is also interesting to look at how different participating countries view the pageant as well as its size and fame. The Miss World pageant, like Miss America, still celebrates the stereotypical values of being white, middle-class, and feminine. Looking at the past 50

winners of Miss World, “current white ideals prevail, even though many of the Miss Worlds fall into other racial classifications” (Hoad 74). The Miss World Pageant also wields great power in its ability to set the norm of feminine beauty, enabling girls to play into the princess fantasy.

Nigeria struggled for years for its contestants to succeed at the Miss World pageant; its national winners got dismal marks in the Miss World competition. But things changed when Nigeria chose a six-foot tall super skinny 18 year old to represent it. Called, “a white girl in black skin,” Miss Nigeria won the Miss World contest and brought her country fame (Onishi). Her win is one of many signs that the trend of beauty is going down a path where dangerously thin is in. This contradicts the ideal of many ethnic groups in Nigeria because among African women, the winner would be regarded as unattractive due to her extremely thin stature. In this example, there is a clear divide between the globalized beauty ideal and that of Africans in Nigeria.

Roberts’s article takes an alternative look at beauty pageants by moving away from the mainstream Miss America Pageant and analyzing “powwow princesses” on Native American reservations. These powwow princesses move on to compete to be Miss Indian World in a larger pageant where they compete in four categories: “Public Speaking, Personal Interview, Traditional Talent, and Dance” (Roberts 265). An interesting part of the Miss Indian World is that the different tribes enjoy the opportunity to learn about one another. Overall, the author argues that Miss Indian World is different from the Miss America Pageant because it has little to do with physical appearance and beauty, but instead the winner is chosen on the criteria of community identity, achievement, and representation.

Unlike her Miss America counterpart, the winner of an Indian princess contest has many duties to accomplish in order to benefit her community. Some of her obligations are sponsoring committees to work on food preparation, taking care of the elders, acting as a role model for behavior and culture, attending powwows as her tribe's representative, and more. The role of a Indian Princess extends far beyond that of the traditional beauty pageant winner in the United States, and while she has many responsibilities to attend to, her title also comes with great recognition and honor for her family. The powwow princesses "incorporated their ideas of tradition with contemporary popular culture to carve out identities meaningful to their modern lives" (Kozol 75). Miss Indian America tends to be a combination of ethnic markers by looking stereotypical Indian but a mix of Indian and American.

Muslim beauty pageants also differ from the traditional Miss America Pageant. In Galal's article, an Islamic satellite TV channel airs a beauty pageant for Muslim women. The series is called "Malikat Jamal Iqraa" meaning "Iqraa's beauty queen." The show is believed to be a criticism of the west's cultural hegemony and simultaneously offers Muslim women a whole new world of identities including that of a beauty queen. There is no swimsuit competition in the contest and the women's physical attributes do not determine a winner but rather the beauty of their "behavior", meaning who is most selfless and obedient as a daughter. These types of pageants exist in stark contrast to those in many countries of Asia where beauty pageants are equally as popular.

In India, women compete for Miss World and Miss Universe, considering the global woman a heroine and goddess. The contestants are hybrids, combining traditional with modern. Media outlets like magazines praise beauty queens and call them role

models for young girls. They symbolize celebrities and the contests they participate in are directed at the middle class. The issue is “Indian citizens, who struggle for water, shelter, and food on an everyday basis, may participate in the imaginary fantasies and selective practices of the global queen’s celebrity life” (Parameswaran 367). Globalization offers an idea of prosperity that clashes with the harsh realities of India, lacking discourse for the majority of poor citizens. This lower class too desires the global beauty queen status just like the middle class.

For India, having its women crowned Miss World, Miss Universe, and Miss Asia-Pacific in the same year was a great honor. These wins helped India show itself to the world as a proud nation, demonstrating its capitalist capabilities and setting the standard of womanhood. In fact, Miss Indias are revered as dearly as are heroic soldiers and famous athletes. The beauty queens represent national pride and simultaneously act as a vehicle to show India’s presence on the global stage. While some see them as positive role models, beauty pageant winners in India are also condemned for going against family values. The image of independent women contradicts that of the “sacrificing mothers and suffering wives” (Ahmed-Ghosh 206). While globalization causes a battle of values to be waged in India, the globalization of beauty psychologically damages those in South Asia and distorts their body image.

Defining the term “disease mongering” as “the opportunistic exploitation of a widespread anxiety about frailty and of faith and scientific advance and ‘innovation,’” Giri, Palaian, and Shankar introduce the idea of fairness creams that are recently popular in South Asia (1187). People have noticed that the beauty pageant winners in India are exceptional beauties, tall and skinny, however with light skin and western beauty ideals.

The craving for fair skin has given rise to a niche in the cosmetic industry that specializes in skin lightening. Advertisements for these products teach audiences that fair skin causes one to be an object of desire, defining white as beautiful and other races as inferior. The authors accuse fairness creams' manufacturers of exploiting "the preference for fair skin" by portraying "it as a necessary prerequisite for success, and [promoting] the use of their product to achieve the ideal" (Shankar, Giri, and Palaian 1187). This practice is evidenced by fairness cream companies' sponsorship of beauty pageants. When these companies promote whiteness as inherently tied to beautiful, women feel the need to change their bodies to adapt, to lighten their skin. Fairness creams teach that women with darker skin do not meet the ideal standard of beauty.

Similarly, Giri observes how cosmetic Chinese hospitals construct beauty norms by analyzing how contemporary Chinese women use plastic surgery. Despite a tension between western and Chinese beauty ideals, women still feel pressure and oppression over their bodies. Due to a globalized ideal of beauty, women in China feel more and more inferior and self conscious about their bodies because they do not match the western ideal. A final, more positive, example of globalization for Asian women is Miss China Europe.

In the Netherlands, there is the Miss China Europe pageant that displays Chinese women's diaspora across Europe. The article displays the way globalization works in the world because Chinese women who are raised in European countries come back together and compete in beauty contests, each with a different culture despite the same ethnic background. The study has two aims: take the women's voices into account and provide an understanding of Chinese women in their positions in society.

Analysis

Positives of the Pageant

It is easy to look at the pageant from the outside and laugh at its dated traditions. It is even easier to laugh at contestants who seem unintelligent or talentless. But whether or not one supports or scoffs at the pageant, it is necessary to look at the positive outcomes that come from its very existence. For many women in the United States, Miss America looks like a role model, an ideal to which they aspire. The pageant also provides the opportunity for women to speak their minds and discuss the issues that they find particularly relevant in their time.

The most physical and tangible benefit of the pageant is its support of scholarships. The Miss America Organization (MAO) gave \$35 million in grants to women in 1999 and “is the largest provider of scholarships to women in the United States” (Callahan 178). Many participants say that without the help of the Organization, they would not have been able to complete their education, that the grants and scholarships helped them, young women, get an education. This mission of the MAO seems in line with the goals of feminists, putting what appear to be two feuding groups on the same side. Providing scholarship money to young women is certainly a positive action of the beauty pageant, and it is what the Organization likes to promote most. From 1987 to 1999, Leonard Horn ran the Miss America Organization (Callahan). In his vision:

People would watch the pageant for the entertainment, but would begin to recognize that the woman selected might actually change their lives. And if we can ever reach that point, Miss America will take on a stature that will be more

than just a spokesperson. She will be the role model we truly believe she is, not only for her peers, but for others who are struggling with problems she has managed to avoid because she has made the right choices. (Callahan 178)

While this is the dream, even Horn himself is skeptical of its potential to become reality (Callahan). Miss America has the potential to truly teach society through her good decisions and beliefs, making her a respectable role model. Even those who dislike the pageant must concede that the contestants over time have changed to be more positive role models. Contrasted with the early winners, “Today’s Miss America is smarter, sharper, more modern. She’s softened both her artificial smile and her helmet of hair” (Callahan 178). In the early days of the pageant, the contestants smiled and paraded out in their suits for a bathing beauty contest. Now contestants must have a talent; they must be able to articulate in front of an audience with charisma. The bar has been set higher and therefore the example set is a more positive one than years past.

Another argument in favor of the pageant is its tendency to turn women into public figures, thus adding women to a typically male-dominated arena. Sonja Modesti looks specifically at the oratory abilities of pageant participants and provides a vital understanding of the pageant because she herself was Miss North Dakota 1998-1999 (Modesti). Modesti argues that once a woman wins the crown and is named Miss America, she must meet higher standards and becomes an elected orator. The role of a winner is more than just presenting herself but “she must demonstrate exceptionally high levels of oratorical flexibility specified to unique contexts” (Modesti 225). This position as an orator benefits women because it showcases their intellect and makes their voices heard. When the pageant presents women as orators, it inherently implies that these

women have worthwhile thoughts and that their opinions matter and should be heard. Modesti said her “responsibility as a state titleholder within the Miss America Organization was to be a voice committed to the public dialogue” (Modesti 225). In this way, the MAO adds a female voice with authority to the public dialogue. Regardless of a person’s opinion of Miss America, she still adds a female perspective to public discussions that often exclude women. To sum up why the pageant is positive for women, Modesti echoes the message of the MAO, stating that it is the world’s largest provider of scholarships for young women and that the organization “encourages its participants to be role models who are civically engaged and seeking higher education” (Modesti 229). Holding this statement to be true, the MAO motivates women to achieve more and be more, thereby empowering women. The organization’s focus on higher education also benefits women especially in areas where a high school diploma is seen as the finish line of education.

Many young women identify with Miss America winners when they see similarities in their lifestyles. Mari Boor Tonn personally idealized Miss America in 1968 because the winner was from her own home state. For girls like her that were raised “in a conservative religious household heavily influenced by the principle of coverture- the submersion of female identity into a husband or father”, Miss America served as an inspiration, an image of freedom they aspired to achieve (Tonn 150). In Tonn’s town in Kansas, it was common for girls to be married at seventeen and always live with a sense of inadequacy. Miss America served as a beacon of hope for girls in regions where “female inferiority was literally an article of religious faith,” (Tonn 150). Contestants serve as models of beauty and rhetoric and have the potential to inspire girls who don’t

believe in themselves to think they can achieve great success through pageants. The sad truth is that the same Miss America, which was Tonn's hero, soon married to a fundamentalist minister. She "replaced her famous name with her husband's, and settled back into the traditional rhythms of small-town Midwestern life" (Tonn 151). Although she served as a role model for oppressed women, this Miss America winner still fell to the practices of patriarchy. Though before her fall, her 15 minutes of fame had the ability to inspire.

When a woman wins Miss America, she stands on the national stage with the country's gaze fixated on her; this is a powerful moment. One winner used her moment and fame to promote her profession as a nurse. Her win was seen as a glorious moment for some nurses, while others were worried that perhaps an association with the pageant would lose the profession some of its hard earned respect (Collins). The winner, Kaye Lani Rae Rafko, states that the "competition measures intelligence, talent, and poise as well as beauty" (Collins 35). To her, the pageant is not an objectifying ritual but rather healthy competition in which women show their smarts and talents. While it is easy to write off Rafko, she sent a strong message in her moment of recognition. Unlike many winners who proceed to use their newfound fame to break into the entertainment industry, Rafko instead wanted to remain a nurse (Collins). She used her platform to send the message that nurses are equal to doctors, stressing to America the hard work and dedication of nurses (Collins). Additionally she made "public pleas for money to subsidize continued research to fight cancer and AIDS" (Collins 35). Rafko is just one example of how a Miss America utilizes her national attention to benefit others. Her

public discourse about nurses and terminal diseases sparked important conversations that otherwise would not happen had she not won the pageant.

Similar to Rafko, Debbye Turner used her win to spread her platform of “Motivating Youth to Excellence” (Frabotta). She was finishing her studies at the “University of Missouri-Columbia College of Veterinary Medicine when she became the 70th Miss America, and she was the first in the pageant's history to have an official platform” (Frabotta p12). The Miss America Organization developed the platform concept in 1989 because it wanted its contestants to choose a relevant issue affecting the country (Miss America Organization). The idea was that contestants would use their fame to attract media attention to a problem and generate community service. The spotlight on Turner and her multiple speaking engagements enabled her to engage various groups to be active in the veterinary community. Turner, like Rafko, provided much needed publicity to a profession that benefitted from the flood of attention. These women are just two examples of how the Miss America Pageant has positive repercussions for society and specifically the members of these two professions.

A more recent winner, Teresa Scanlan was Miss America 2011 and embodied the image of a Miss America orator as she traveled the country making appearances and speaking with different audiences. A reporter covered her travels to Walter Reed Army Medical Centers to visit with young men home from Afghanistan (Young). Scanlan flawlessly charmed all those around her, yet her aspirations are much bigger than simply smiling for cameras and taking pictures. Using her \$50,000 grand prize, Scanlan will fund her college tuition to Patrick Henry College and “plans on becoming a Nebraska congresswoman becoming president” (Young). An orator and potential politician, this

Miss America sets a strong example for young women in the nation, sending a message that they can achieve and be leaders.

To those who say Miss America is rooted in the past, history shows otherwise. Starting from the 1920s, the winner of the Miss America Pageant has “changed with the times: she has been black, deaf, and a social activist with platforms ranging from AIDS prevention to children's self esteem...although she still struts in a bathing suit” (Neimark p42). As shown by the examples of prior winners who become progressive orators, every Miss America teaches in her own unique way. Based on the fact that Miss America has been chosen above all the other contestants, she teaches society what the American ideal is and what conflicts are most pressing (Neimark). Simply put, “Miss America is a mirror of America” (Neimark 42). She encompasses a “can-do” spirit, values education in middle-class American fashion, and is drenched in glitz (Neimark). From this perspective, Miss America reflects many American tendencies and values, but also is a crucial tool for analyzing society, making her a positive asset. She serves “as a living snapshot of an entire country” therefore enabling the United States insight into itself (Neimark 73). Though others would call Miss America “a perfect reflection of a slice of American values as they stood a quarter-century ago,” she still remains relevant in the development of American identity (Zipp and Teicher 1). Similar to the growth of diversity in America, scholars also mark a growing trend of more diverse women entering the pageant. Since 1984, there have been four African-American winners and Hispanic and Indian contestants (Neimark). Some argue that “the pageant may be providing a way for immigrant and outsider groups to enter the mainstream” and therefore it enables groups who previously were oppressed to showcase their beauty (Neimark 43). The

ability of the pageant to evolve with the times enables it to better serve “out-groups” like women and minorities in the United States.

While the previously mentioned winners often times have platforms and intellectual aspirations, not all beauty queens represent the organization and themselves so well. Carrie Prejean was a finalist for Miss USA 2009 and has been compared to politician Sarah Palin in that both women claim that they are middle class Americans, conservative, and religious (Fullilove). Despite her strong faith, there have been reports of a Prejean sex tape and she proudly states that plastic surgery does not go against her faith since she does not “see anywhere in the Bible where it says you shouldn’t get breast implants” (Fullilove 11). Despite her private sexual behavior, Prejean still published a book supporting traditional values (Fullilove). It is not Prejean’s sex tape or plastic surgery that is troubling, but her hypocrisy. She, unlike past winners, does not act like a role model, but rather an example of a materialistic woman who contradicts her own beliefs. In Prejean’s case, her actions do not match her platform and she therefore does the Miss USA pageant a disservice.

Donelle Ruwe participated in pageants with her sisters when she was younger and is a proponent of the pageant. Mrs. Ruwe is an award-winning scholar as well as Miss Meridian 1985. She acknowledges the flaws of the pageant but believes that scholarships and contestants’ participation in the pageant better the lives of many girls in the United States. Though Ruwe thinks the pageant benefits women, her logic seems essentially flawed. She gives a hypothetical situation in which the pageant is expected to hurt a woman but actually makes her stronger. Ruwe says, “a woman may believe in a damaging ideal, such as that only thin women are attractive. However, in the process of

dieting and exercising, a woman actually might improve her physical health and energy level and thereby also gain self-esteem and greater independence” (Ruwe 139). The pageant making a woman feel bad about her body is *never* really a positive. Yes, she may lose weight, lower her cholesterol, and exercise more, but she will always be trying to live up to a constructed image put forth by the pageant. The self-esteem and confidence of *all* women, not just unhealthy ones, are affected by the beauty ideals objectified women construct. The contestants help shape a beauty standard that causes women to compete with one another to have the better body. While these women are objectified and judged based on their appearance, they are also idolized by people like Ruwe and the countless young girls that aspire to know the feeling of walking across the Miss America stage in a sparkling ball gown.

Women’s Bodies in the Media

When people craft arguments against beauty pageants, one word tends to jump to everyone’s mind: objectification. But what does this word really mean in the context of a pageant like Miss America? Is it still a relevant concern in today’s day and age?

Through its tradition of parading women across the stage in swimsuits and gowns, the pageant fosters competition between women based on their physical appearance. Those who would like to argue that the Miss America Pageant is a progressive event that betters women with scholarships must concede that historically the pageant started out as a swimsuit contest. It would surprise many to learn that initially pageants were *not* women parading in swimsuits for men, but in fact were organized by feminists. In the early 1910s, pageants were a tool for suffragists to spread their ideas in an entertaining way. They were so important that “scholars cite the suffragists’ skillful use of pageants as

one reason for the success of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920” (Hamlin 28). Instead of depicting women in swimsuits and ball gowns, the suffragists were more theatrical and depicted historic strong females like Joan of Arc or Florence Nightingale. These pageants were used “to persuade viewers, gain publicity, fortify adherents, and raise money” (Hamlin 28). The pageants of suffragists contrast greatly with the Miss America Pageant that emerged into the spotlight while the suffragists’ pageants began to fade away into obscurity. Just a year after women won the right to vote, the Miss America Pageant started to take form and was founded in 1921. The fact that the pageant began a year after women got the vote makes it hard to deny that the Miss America Pageant was not, in part, a backlash to women’s suffrage. Many scholars agree that the pageant “is evidence of a pervasive post suffrage backlash and America’s anxiety over changes in gender roles wrought by women’s participation in politics and public life” (Hamlin 29). It is difficult to agree with proponents of the pageant when its conception is so closely tied with taking away from women’s achievements. While the pageant has changed and adapted to fit the times, it has continuously objectified women’s bodies by making them into a spectacle, something to be watched and measured.

In 1922, the pageant was extended to be a weeklong event. Instead of only featuring the women, there were “city officials, townspeople, and police officers dressed up in their bathing suits or as clowns. Such ancillary activities served to legitimize and desexualize the pageant, even though the bathing beauty competition was the main event” (Hamlin 37). Only in its second year, the pageant made an effort to detract the focus from women’s bodies in swimsuits and added other events. But the fact is that the swimsuit contest *was* the main event; it is what started the pageant and what people came to see.

As the pageant expanded, it became something to make money from. Businessmen sought to profit from the pageant and in order to do so, women's bodies were used to sell goods. The objectification of women's bodies not only was profitable, but demeaned women at a time when they were finally starting to enter realms previously dominated by men. The pageant helped produce a femininity that "fostered superficial competition among women, and encouraged women and men alike to view women's bodies as objects to be critiqued" (Hamlin 45). The issue of women's bodies in the pageant is interesting because the contestants' bodies are famous and known for looking a certain way. In Singh's study, their bodies' measurements are compared and analyzed.

In Devendra Singh's psychological study, the researchers studied how men judged women's beauty based on their waist-to-hip ratio. The fact that Miss America Contestants are used to document ideal female attractiveness supports the argument that these women's bodies are objectified to construct an image of beauty, one that all other women strive for. Unlike Playboy Centerfolds whose bodies are becoming more tubular over the years, "the body shape of the contestants has retained an hourglass shape" (Singh 296). While the hips and waist measurements both decreased slightly, the breast measurement increased. These findings indicated the Miss America Pageant promotes women who are getting skinnier over the years but have bigger breasts. I found the most shocking finding of the study to be how women's ideal of beauty differed from men's. The data showed "male students chose female figures that were slightly heavier than ideal figures chosen by female students as being more attractive" (Singh 301). This is a sad finding because girls are trying to live up to a skinny standard that is probably unhealthy and skinnier than men even prefer. This data supports my argument that the

pageant objectifies women's bodies for several reasons. The fact that all contestants are measured and compared makes them into a commodity. They are being judged based upon the size of their waists, their breasts; each body part is broken down and measured so that it may compete with the parts of other women. This practice is damaging to women for two reasons. First, it makes them into objects and second it supports competition among women to change their bodies to meet the standard of beauty set forth by their predecessors.

Nine years after Singh's monumental study, other scholars picked up the data to further analyze the waist-to-hip ratios (WHR) of *Playboy* centerfolds and Miss America winners. Before even analyzing the data, it is imperative to look at *why* these women are even subjects in this study. Miss America winners "are taken as representative icons of venerated beauty standards," and therefore are the subjects of the study (Freese and Meland 133). With this knowledge, Freese and Meland critically analyze Singh's findings that state "both centerfolds and beauty contest winners got slightly thinner...their bodies got measurably leaner over the decades" (Freese and Meland 133). While the experimenters found the average WHR to be .677 instead of Singh's .7, their results also confirmed findings that centerfolds had a significantly wider range of WHR than Miss America winners (Freese and Meland). This indicates that Miss America winners, and therefore contestants, are held to a stricter beauty ideal, a stricter body image to attain and then maintain. The authors argue that using data from their study to say there is an innate preference in males for this WHR is detrimental to evolutionary psychology (Freese and Meland). But outside of their area of study, their data is detrimental in several ways. As previously stated, when women, specifically Miss

America winners, are broken down and measured piece by piece, they are objectified. Additionally, building this standard, this ratio for women to fall into to be considered beautiful is incredibly harmful to women's self concept in the United States. As Miss America contestants parade on stage demonstrating the ideal WHR, the researchers also analyzed *Playboy* centerfolds, indicating that women in magazines are equally important in setting beauty ideals.

Advertising in magazines markets not only products to consumers, but also an ideal and image of beauty. Past research shows that the images of attractive people in ads influence consumers' perception of their face and body attractiveness (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore). In society, people strive to achieve the culturally accepted beauty ideal that they see repeated in the media and in their lives. The beauty ideal or "look" society constructs has specific dimensions like "'pouty' lips vs. thin lips, large breasts vs. small" (Englis et al. 50). In many cases, achieving these beauty ideals involves either spending money or even plastic surgery. However in every case, there is an insistence that what a woman looks like is not enough, that she must alter her appearance in order to be "beautiful" in the eyes of society. For women who look nothing like the women they see in magazine ads or music videos, what are they to think about themselves? They are made to think that their unique looks are not beautiful, and that they are unattractive in a world that so highly values the beauty of women. In the case of advertisements, and arguably the Miss America Pageant, there are specific gatekeepers who decide what images are shown. These gatekeepers "play a crucial role in shaping audience perceptions" because they "influence the selection of beauty types thought to appeal to a mass audience" (Englis et al. 51). When the researchers analyzed the beauty images

gatekeepers have been pushing, they found that “music television presents a stereotyped image of beauty in its heavy emphasis on a single look- Sensual/Exotic Beauty” (Englis et al. 57). In this case, gatekeepers are teaching that beauty is tied to sex, and women must be overtly sexual and exotic to keep up with the ideals of American culture. However, at the end of the day, it is irrelevant if music videos and magazine ads push a Vamp look or a Sex Kitten look; what matters is that the ideal is boiled down to one image, one trend. By picking one beauty, there are those who are excluded. Similar to picking one winner in the pageant, media that pick one beauty exclude women who do not meet this image. Similar studies also critique beauty magazines for causing body dissatisfaction in women.

There are proven relationships between body shape dissatisfaction and eating disorders and reading beauty magazines (Morry and Staska). Many scholars link the epidemic of eating disorders with poor body image, but what causes this poor body image to begin with? “One of the most empirically supported theories is the sociocultural model, which emphasizes social and cultural pressures towards slimness in women,” using this model, one can see that media images depict a thin woman as beautiful and therefore put pressure on women (Morry and Staska 269). When women constantly see beauty tied to thinness, their thinking is affected which may lead to disordered eating. Beauty magazines, like beauty pageants, have the power to determine what is socially and culturally accepted as beautiful, and when they show thin, usually underweight models as the standard to achieve, the body image of everyday women is hurt. The media’s obsession with “thinness in women and physical fitness in men” leads “to dissatisfaction with one’s own body and disordered eating [behaviors] as women and men

try to attain these ideals” (Morry and Staska 270). These findings have been supported by multiple studies and have important implications. As discussed, a small number of gatekeepers make the decision of what will be shown as beautiful, and consequently, their decisions and opinions have led to disordered eating and poor body image in the United States. The beauty magazine industry serves as a field teeming with evidence that proves selecting one kind of beauty causes others to strive to meet this beauty standard, no matter how unattainable it may be in actuality.

The first ever fashion and beauty-themed exhibition, “Beauty Culture”, in Los Angeles showcases the results of this practice in an artistic way. 175 images cover the walls and show classic glamour portraits as well as “more unsettling images, such as a needle entering a lip” (Oliver 3). Designed to show the ugly that comes with the beauty in the beauty industry, the exhibit embodies many of the problems that scholars have discussed. When the media, whether through pageants or magazines, shows a beauty ideal, people strive to achieve it. In the exhibit, artists show how the public goes to extreme and grisly lengths to become this ideal, from breast implants to Botox injections (Oliver). The exhibit is timely because “in 2010 there were more than 12 million cosmetic procedures...performed in the United States, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons” (Oliver 3). The mass amounts of surgery Americans undergo to change their body indicates that there is a need for change. When one type of body is constantly hailed as beautiful, there are serious psychological repercussions for the listeners of this message.

The television program “The Swan” only exacerbates this growing problem in which women compulsively feel the need to alter their bodies to match those seen in the

media. “The Swan” intensifies the growing sense of inadequacy in women based on its mission to change appearances through plastic surgery. “The Swan” airs on Fox as a makeover and pageant reality show in which women’s bodies are renovated as if they were dilapidated buildings in need of reconstruction. The beginning of each episode focuses on the shame women feel about their bodies; shame is necessary to warrant the concealment and change that the plastic surgery will bring (Tice and Weber para. 14). While the normalization of plastic surgery is troubling, the program is even more problematic because it combines a “makeover” (involving carving one’s body up) with a pageant in which the “new” women compete. Many criticize the show for targeting women of color, who by the end of the show have been bleached “white” culturally, and completely surrender their culture (Tice and Weber). However, perhaps a more harmful practice of the show is its shaming of the ordinary.

Its apparent racism affects women of color, but *all* women are made to feel ashamed of their bodies when the show puts down “normal” looking girls. Contestants complain of looking like a “Plain Jane,” and seek the show to change their bodies and faces (Tice and Weber). Even the surgeon on the show says his “goal is to transform average women into confident beauties” (Tice para. 23). Though when he says transform, he means the removal of their individual physical character and to make them appear generically beautiful. Unique characteristics like a bump in the nose or the shape of a chin are shaved down to fit inside the popular mold. Wide hips and curves are sucked out of women to give them a slimmer frame. Almost like the Barbie aisle in a toy store, women’s appearances become constructed on the show to match the widely accepted ideal of “beauty.” Black women are made to trade in their cornrows for straight silky hair

and even a white woman loses “her brown curly shoulder-length hair for shiny platinum blonde extensions” (Tice and Weber para.25). At the end of the show, “swans” move on to participate in a pageant that “has the potential to underscore women's objectification through the hyper-sexualization of their bodies on display” (Tice and Weber para.41). This program comes full circle in relation to Miss America. The beauty standards taught by the pageant have constructed a beauty standard that women strive to achieve. When they do not look this way, they turn to plastic surgery and dieting as seen in “The Swan.” Once they have “transformed,” they go on to compete in the Swan pageant in which one winner reigns as the ultimate beauty. The cycle is a vicious one as the winner of the Swan pageant may inspire other women to change their bodies, habits, and culture so they too can “win.” But in this practice, no one ever actually wins and all those caught up in this tornado of “beauty” lose.

In the practice of beauty pageants, the potential for cooperative relationships between women is shattered as they compete against one another, objectifying themselves so that they may call themselves the ideal (J. Jones). Miss America may be the best known pageant, but there are many other “Misses” out there like Miss USA, Miss Black America, Miss Universe, Miss Hemisphere, and others who all aid in the construction of an “ideal” that hurts women overall (J. Jones). Specifically, the Miss America Pageant started on the heels of women’s suffrage and by “focusing on their bodies effectively silenced” suffragists’ voices (J. Jones 101). In the Miss America Pageant, there can never be a winner. It is easy to be fooled by the tiara and tears when a woman is crowned, but within a year, she is “sacrificed” for the new Miss America. The pageant could be seen as a “a mock battle, in which representatives...combat each other

with weapons traditionally allotted to women by the culture: their bodies, their faces and their charm. The final combatant, left standing when all others have fallen, is left to dethrone the aging ruler” (J. Jones 103). While comparing a beauty pageant to a violent battle may seem outlandish, the pieces do seem to fit. All elements of sisterhood and female empowerment are tossed out the window as 50 women all compete for the title of another woman. Because a new Miss America is chosen each and every year, she remains forever young as the “older” queen is sacrificed and pushed out of the limelight. So not only is there competition between the contestants each year, but women are also made to compete with their predecessors. Overall, the pageant is one big battleground for women, a stark contradiction to birth of pageantry in the women’s movement in which women collectively worked together for their rights.

While many contestants in the Miss America Pageant say they use their prize money for scholarships, pageants exist in the realm of higher education too. Though it may seem unlikely, some universities have held pageants for more than 75 years (Tice). In an environment where intelligence should be the number one priority, “queen contests, in fact, became the most popular, and in many cases, the primary source of prestige and ceremonial space afforded women students on college campuses” (Tice 251). It became a popular practice to always pick a princess or sweetheart at campus events (Tice). This practice of picking a woman to be queen, or princess, or simply a beauty contest winner restricts women to an oppressive gender role in a place that should be liberating. In history, education, and especially higher education, was reserved for men and men alone. The entrance of women into colleges and universities was a monumental achievement. To take intelligent hard-working college women and put them on a stage to superficially

compete with one another seems like a travesty. More recently, supporters of campus pageants have been trying to legitimize them, saying that the winner cannot just have a pretty face but must also be a leader (Tice). Regardless of how progressive campuses try to make their pageants, they will still be harmful to women because at the end of the day, they receive praise on how well “they discipline their bodies and selves to accommodate hegemonic constructions” (Tice 276).

Women idolize the contestants in the Miss America Pageant while men objectify their bodies at the same time. The initial tool of suffragists has been mutilated into a pageant that shows women off like objects, and the public feeds into this practice. Women who fiercely compete with one another to set beauty standards become the heroes of young girls who try to look just like the contestants. A vicious cycle is established as women see beauty clearly defined and broken down in terms of numbers and measurements and must go on knowing that they can never really look like that. The contestants, along with promoting their own objectification, promote princess myths to the public. Several popular myths related to feminine ideals fed off of and promote similar physical ideals.

Pageant Myths

The Cinderella Myth

The pageant parallels to the fairy tale “Cinderella” which promotes the idea that men choose beautiful women based on looks more than personality. As shown earlier in the paper, the women who participate in the pageants often times are objectified and idolized at the same time. A result of this idolization is that the public adopts the stereotypes or myths portrayed by the contestants. A common myth the pageant teaches is

that of the perfect girl, an ideal girl who thinks no bad thoughts and only has good will towards others. Miss America contestants are great examples of perfect girls. When the winners are announced, the losers are expected to hug and smile at the girl who has just won. It seems ludicrous that someone would seem so happy for someone else when she spent years working toward this dream and it has all come crashing down before her on live television. But this is the perfect girl, even though she poured her heart and soul into this competition, she is expected to smile and gracefully hug the winner before sashaying off stage where she is likely to break down and cry. As Henke points out, the myth of the perfect girl silences the voices of young girls who would rather be “perfect” than be themselves. Young girls also learn to imitate the beauty ideals contestants represent. Often times “girls conflate standards of beauty and standards of goodness by learning to pay attention to their ‘looks’ and by listening to what others say about them” (Henke 231). These behaviors sound strikingly similar to the pageant; girls equating beauty with goodness and letting others judge them based upon their appearance. The pageant clearly promotes the idea that girls are not cherished or loved based on their personalities, but instead on their looks. The concept of the perfect girl is something that most fairy tales are built upon, a heroine who is not aggressive and who is always sweet, a girl who is loved by all (Henke 231). This perfectly passive mold is what contestants try to emulate and in turn young girls emulate it as well. The fairy tale most commonly associated with the Miss America Pageant is Cinderella based on their similarities.

Cinderella and Miss America are similar because they both portray the perfect girl image and find success based on their looks. The story of Cinderella is one that young girls learn all over the world; a young girl is dressed in rags cleaning the fireplace

covered in cinder and is cruelly named Cinderella for this. But when her fairy godmother uses her magic powers, Cinderella is dressed in a beautiful gown and goes to the ball where the prince falls in love with her. In the end, he marries her and they live happy ever after. In this popular tale, Cinderella's beauty is what lifts her out of obscurity and causes her to be whisked off into the castle. The Miss America Pageant and "beauty contests have long existed to legitimize the Cinderella mythology for women, to make it seem that beauty is all a woman needs for success and, as a corollary, that beauty ought to be major pursuit of all women" (Watson and Martin "Pluralism" 107). The pageant reinforces princess myths like Cinderella in which beauty is the most important quality of a woman, not her intelligence or personality, but her appearance. Both these fairy tales and the pageant teach children that without good looks or a fancy dress, you will never find Prince Charming, or if you find him, he will not want you because you do not look a certain way. This myth is extremely detrimental to the development of girls because it glorifies beauty above all other traits. The pageant sends a message that one's appearance always matters regardless of personality, and this is something adults and children alike comprehend (Watson and Martin "Pluralism" 117). An aspect of princess myths that is constantly critiqued is the physical perfection of heroines.

Princess myths often teach that the girls who live the happy ending are flawlessly beautiful and this image is incarnated in all of the Miss America contestants. The pageant and commercial media in general rarely represent "these women as less than perfect, as human beings with foibles and flaws. Instead, their faces and bodies are presented to the public with sex appeal and provide limited versions of body types, hair styles, and racial differences" (Anuakan 112). The women who represent all the Cinderellas from all fifty

states appear perfect, sexual, and similar. None of them are radically different from one another because they all strive to emulate the established beauty ideal. Their differences and unique traits are pushed into the background to homogenize them so that they are more easily objectified. According to DuCille's article on Black Barbie, diversity cannot exist in a mass produced product. The same case is with mass produced beauty; all the girls must measure up to a beauty standard and therefore all look similar. Those who are different are not considered beautiful. These are the lessons the pageant teaches and communicates to women everywhere. The princess myth is damaging because it pushes the role of the perfect girl on women as well as overemphasizes beauty. However, it continues to have other detrimental side effects.

The princess myth teaches that beauty can be used an asset or a means to end in some cases. Especially when it comes to men, the princess myth encourages women to use seduction to get what they want. Its suggestion "that women can solve their problems by catching a suitor draws on" the "feminine power of seduction. That myth- that women have the power to control their circumstances with their feminine wiles instead of with brains, talent, and persistence- plays at the current juncture of pageant aims" (Anuakan 120). This last point is especially relevant because Miss America is known for winning based on her looks. Even though the pageant has added talent portions and a platform portion for the contestants to show their intelligence and charity, all of the extra events seem overshadowed by the fact that the pageant is a beauty contest; there are *no* ugly contestants. The Miss America Pageant upholds the princess myth in that its contestants use their good looks primarily to win the crown. The example set by the Miss America contestants is part of a greater social expectation that weighs heavily on the shoulders of

every female in the United States. Girls are expected to follow the princess mold, that of the perfect girl, whose looks are her most valuable asset, who conforms to appear beautiful. But for those who are “unable to fit into princess mythology,” they find that the “fairy tales do not nurture their individual personality” and the result is “these images continue to have long-lasting effects on women’s psyche because the princess ideal is an inescapable social force” (Anuakan 113). It is safe to say that many girls in Western Culture feel the pressures of the princess myth, the need to appear beautiful, feminine, kind, and passive at all times. But is this myth really an inescapable force? One cannot be too sure, but what is certain is that the Miss America Pageant helps negative princess myths thrive in a new millennium.

There is an ongoing debate about whether the pageant is positive or negative for women because despite its archaic traditions, it works to provide scholarships for women. Some journalists go as far to say that “pageant contestants represent the legacy of feminism” because they “may play the game to win scholarships or fame, but many are unwilling to buy in... to the pageant’s image” (Dow 142). However this assertion seems wrong because many of the contestants go on to use their fame to pursue careers in modeling, acting, and entertaining. They rarely use their scholarship money to get a PhD or start their own study or research. It is irritating to hear the pageant boast that it provides the most scholarships to women when few women actually use their winnings to make scholarly advancements. A writer for the *New York Times* spells it out bluntly when he says, “you’re kind of talented, you’re kind of smart. If you were superior at any of these things, you wouldn’t need to bother with this,” and by this he means the Miss America Pageant (Dow 141). What this writer means, and he puts it harshly, is that the

contestants *aren't* all that smart or talented because if they were they wouldn't need the scholarships given to them by the Miss America Organization. I'm not sure how fair this statement is and it is clearly a generalization, but there is definitely some reasoning behind it all. These girls objectify themselves because they feel they only have their looks as a way of getting ahead, a prime example of princess myths at work.

The princess myth is a prevalent lens through which society often looks, so it is important to look at how that lens was constructed. Arguably the best-known princess stories came from Germany, from the Grimms. According to Jelinek, myths in general function to turn history into nature, so rather than simply being a narrative, myths and fairy tales are a "type of speech." These myths guided the lifestyles of its readers, teaching parents how to raise their children in the 1800s, casting strict familial and gender roles (Tautz). Over time, myths and fairy tales have proved to be influential over people's thinking and behaviors, but what exactly is taught in the myths? Many fairy tales "silenced women and enshrined women's exclusion from the makers of the national literary canon and tradition" (Tautz 169). Women were denied credit for their contributions to these stories, and the lessons in fairy tales have persisted throughout the years, maintaining unequal treatment for women based on gender.

Popular fairy tales still demonstrate sexism when "the heroines end up being silenced for many years, only to be rescued by a male hero" and it always seems that "the prince brings the story to its ultimate conclusion and happy end in marriage" (Tautz 169). Popular tales like *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* are remade and retold to children today, yet they are drenched in traditional bourgeois values in which women are dependent on and inferior to men. Equally troubling, fairy tales promise the same lesson

Cinderella teaches, that one can change her social situation by abiding by gender ideals. This the lesson taught, “beginning with the tales of the Grimms and leading to the cinematic myths of Disney” that take neutral messages and charge them with “female and male stereotypes and male hegemony” (Tautz 170). The messages and lessons that fairy tales pump into the minds of children matter because they have lasting effects.

In today’s society, women are faced with many choices and identities to navigate. Some argue that as women’s options and roles become less restrictive, it is becoming more difficult for them to make the “right” choice, because it is unclear what that even means. Despite the opportunity to work in historically male-dominated fields, there are still the “‘seductions of dependence,’ the allure of being placed on a pedestal and taken care by of Prince Charming” (Cottle para.3). It seems the lessons of fairy tales crash into the goals of progress and feminism. While women struggle for total equality in the 21st century, they still grapple with the temptation of dependency, of falling back to what they know about gender roles from myths.

Cottle argues that “there is nothing wrong with wanting to be beautiful or charming or sexy or glamorous” but women have “labored too long for the right to also be seen as something more. When we...allow ourselves to be treated as pretty objects or coquettish children or dependent damsels, we undermine the ‘relationship of equals’ that we claim to desire” (para.23). This description sounds awfully similar to how the Miss America Pageant represents women. They are represented as objects to be judged on a numeric scale; they are child-like based on the fact that contestants are always young; and they are damsels in that they seek a twinkling crown to show their transformation from damsel to princess. The concept of a princess is not inherently evil or demeaning, “but

the role must be based on equality and intelligence not European standards for pretty objects” (Cottle para.26). The struggle of defining one’s femininity continues to challenge women to this day, but it “is the responsibility of women who...have escaped the lure of the castle to balance the lessons girls learn from the fairy tales and romance novels and beauty pageants and fashion magazines” (Cottle para.25). In other words, it is okay to read fairy tales and fashion magazines, but one must maintain a balanced perspective and be able to critically analyze these media. It is okay to want to be beautiful like a princess, to wear ball gowns, but women must aspire to be princesses capable of rescuing themselves, ones who are smart and free thinking, capable of great things. The problem with the princess myths are that they restrict women to a specific, usually passive, role that hinders women’s movement toward equality with men.

Often times, the contestants of beauty pageants like Miss America are likened to characters from the movie “The Stepford Wives.” They’re busty, blonde, obedient to and objectified by men. Many would argue that today’s woman is past “Stepford,” that few wives resemble a plastic, robotic woman solely existing to please her husband. But Orenstein points out that although women have advanced their lives and standing in society:

We have internalized a piece of Stepford, becoming...our own Stepford husbands- imposing a conformist definition of beauty and femininity. Girls' and women's magazines incessantly promote perfect thighs, abs and hair, and achieving the perfect look has moved beyond diet and exercise. More and more, we place ourselves willingly under the knife, happily embracing the plastic. (23)

Though women's pursuit of society's ideal beauty, they all seem to look alike, with the same nose, body, cheekbones, chin, etc. This desire to reinvent oneself mirrors characteristics of the Cinderella myth in that one transforms into her ideal self. With many modern stories adapting Cinderella, the plot and images remain the same as "the heroine's transformation from Plain Jane to Queen Bee is represented by a montage in which she shops for clothes and gets her hair and make-up overhauled" (Orenstein 23). The fairy godmother may be absent visually, but she exists in credit cards and makeup used to transform protagonists from "plain" into a beauty worthy of the title "princess." The idea of transforming oneself plays off people's inner insecurities and their deep desire to be loved. Women would do well to hear the caution that lies even within the Cinderella tale, for in the quest of achieving the ideal, women may fall into the role of the stepsisters, mutilating their feet in attempts to fit the Cinderella mold or shoe (Orenstein). Though the princess myth is the most prevalent, other myths lurk in the inner workings of the pageants.

Myth-Conceptions

While princess myths can be found throughout the pageant, there also other myths that have trickled down from the Miss America Pageant into society. It is a common misconception that the contestants in the pageant are everyday, ordinary, down to earth girls. This is the myth of the "Girl Next Door." The reality is that many of the girls have been competing in pageants for years; otherwise they never would have made it to the national stage. Contrary to popular belief, the girls that audiences see on stage are in no way, shape, or form "amateurs," but are likely to have been competing in pageants since they were small children. Pageants are like going to work and competitions are like a job.

The idea that the contestants on stage are average All-American girls is completely wrong. This myth hurts women's self esteem because they may feel that normal American women look and act this way. Contestants who act as role models are mistaken for being the "norm" when they are truly "exceptions." Young girls who watch the pageant may feel like they must act and look like contestants in order to be normal, to be the "girl next door." This belief is harmful for a number of reasons proven earlier; young girls will try to be the "perfect girl," living passively as they objectify their bodies. Another myth lies in the actual judging of contestants.

In the pageant, highly trained young ladies use their bodies and looks in order to compete with other women for a prize. This is a negative practice for women, but the actual judging of women's bodies in the pageant is damaging as well. As the girls nervously parade out their bodies, "judges are looking for certain predictable, recurrent patterns in the composite of the beauty queen type" (Riverol "Myth" 214). Numbers are an integral part of judging women in and out of the pageant, giving women a number on a scale from 0 to 10 to rate their looks. The system of rating women has been normalized so that "ten and zero have become part of our life patterns. Miss USA and Miss Universe even have computer readouts" that break them down into a mess of numbers (Riverol "Myth" 214). The myth of the "Perfect 10" is false because beauty is such an intangible and subjective concept that judges cannot assign it a numerical value. What one person deems beautiful is different from the next person's understanding of beauty. Therefore, the entire system that judges use to eliminate contestants and pick a winner is based on a fantasy, a fallacy. Though the myth of the "Perfect 10" and the "Girl Next Door "

contribute to misconceptions about the pageant, the princess myth seems the most destructive.

The contestants in the Miss America Pageant objectify themselves despite being role models and absorb the princess myth, teaching that beauty matters more than personality. The myth instills fear in young girls that if they don't follow the perfect girl role, they will never find Prince Charming. The end result is girls silencing their voices and competing with one another on superficial levels to appear the most beautiful and seductive to men. The pageant puts an emphasis on finding a man, and this can be seen within its rules. Married and divorced women are barred from entering the pageant, meaning that legally single women are the only ones who may compete. The pageant is not interested in having a woman with a man compete, but prefer women who are still searching for their men. It all seems too perfect; a beautiful young damsel is crowned Miss America, dressed as a princess, she sets out toward the happy ending that awaits, a future marriage with a man. The overall performance in pageants excludes all homosexual women since the goal is to seduce men implying that all perfect girls are heterosexual, but it also excludes women who aren't white.

Miss America and Race

Black is Beautiful?

The princess myth, reinforced by the pageant, praises a white beauty that black women and minorities can never be. If you ask children what a princess looks like, they will surely know and have similar responses. There is a universal image of princesses that fairy tales put forth and they "depict heroines resembling chalk-white, golden-haired, angelic young girls. They model gender roles in which female characters are passive

princesses waiting to be rescued, cared for and protected by men” (Anuakan 116). Not only do the princess images make women dependent to men, but they also exclude women of color. The contestants of the Miss America Pageant traditionally define what beauty is in the United States, and as proven earlier in this paper, the contestants uphold and live the princess myth. So where does this leave women who are not white? Minority women, especially blacks, are made to feel like their natural looks are not beautiful and that they must imitate the appearance of white women in order to be judged as beautiful.

The push to look less black and more white has an impact on how black women see themselves and how they think others see them. Black women are encouraged to lighten their skin, lose their curves, and straighten their hair in order to be considered beautiful. Some may disagree that black women are pressured to imitate the looks of whites and argue that the pageant is colorblind. But a dark and racist history will forever haunt the Miss America Pageant no matter how progressive it may become. Historically, blacks were excluded from the contest for years, even in the 1960s amid the Civil Rights Movement so they held their own 1968 Miss Black America Pageant (Kinloch 95). The director of the Miss America Pageant from 1935-1967, Lenora Slaughter, was quoted saying, ““Contestants must be of good health and of the white race”” (Kinloch 96). Comments and beliefs like this fed into racist stereotypes that rejected black women as beautiful and therefore disqualified them from being contestants. It was only in 1970 that the first black contestant competed in the Miss America Pageant. The inclusion of diversity in the pageant seems contradictory since the Miss America Pageant upheld the ideal beauty of whiteness as part of its tradition for many years.

Despite being excluded from Miss America, black women found their own space in national media through the magazine *Ebony* (Ebony). It was up to the black community to put their own pageants and fashion shows together in order to showcase their own unique black beauty, ranging from hues of smoke to chocolate to apricot and cream (Ebony). National black beauty pageants took place in the 60s, with 1968 being of particular importance (Ebony). This year itself was a controversial time because feminists were protesting the objectification committed by the pageant while “Civil Rights activists protested the effective exclusion of black women from the pageant by running their own Miss Black America contest” (Weitz 1133). This was milestone because it was a national black beauty pageant, bigger than the earlier state pageants. The history of Miss Black America is fascinating, and empowering for minority women, but it too was a beauty pageant carrying the same flaws that the previously “white only” Miss America Pageant has as well. Though put together to give black women a place in the world of beauty, “the Miss Black America contest highlighted how the fight for racial equality could reinforce gendered inequalities as well as specifically middle-class notions of what is a beautiful woman” (Weitz 1134). Even though Miss America eventually included black women, “state and national pageant officials tended to favor light-skinned Blacks” (Ebony 206). Though over time, darker black women have won proving that black can be beautiful too.

It is beneficial for the pageant to distance itself from its history full of hate, but it is important not to assume implementing integration pardons the organization. Let us not forget the importance of the perfect girl, the myth pageant contestants and society push on girls. This myth can damage the development of self-sufficient young girls, but its exclusion of girls of color makes it even more detrimental for young black girls. Black

women in general compare themselves to the “perfect beauty” standard that is based on European ideals, which even for white women is rarely achievable. The result is that black women doubt their own beauty and role in the world based on the fact that they do not match this traditional standard. While the pageant is riddled with myths and fairy tale rhetoric, it all seems to exclude women of color. Whenever discussing race in the Miss America Pageant, Vanessa Williams inevitably seems to come into play.

When Miss America 1984, Vanessa Williams, won the pageant, her win defied the norms of the pageant and the norm of what is beauty. She was the first black Miss America and her victory caused her to receive death threats from white racists and even criticism from some in the black community who “questioned whether Williams’s green eyes and golden brown hair made her ‘sufficiently’ black enough” (Watson and Martin “Politics” 12). When three major networks announced that a men’s adult magazine was going to publish nude photographs of her, Williams was humiliated and later relinquished her crown for the 7 remaining weeks of her reign (Watson and Martin “Politics”). Because Williams violated the virginal image put forth by princess myths infused in the pageant, she was under great pressure to resign, which she eventually did. So in less than a year, the first black Miss America was crowned and then ostracized, making a groundbreaking winner a disgrace. The lack of black winners in the Miss America Pageant legitimizes cultural norms that continue to block black women from being considered ideally beautiful. In the United States, “self-love for black women, according to black feminist thought, will not result from accepting and adopting standards of western beauty and femininity, as those standards are often catalysts in vying for the Miss America crown” (Kinloch 102). Black women struggle daily to feel beautiful when all the

images in the media, and on the Miss America stage, tell them otherwise; they are told to look white in order to look beautiful.

As discussed, black women only first appeared in the pageant in 1970, nearly fifty years after its start. In fact, “‘Rule Seven’ of the Pageant’s bylaws for nearly half a century restricted participation to ‘members’ of the white race” (Banet-Weiser 127). This rule was enforced well into the 1940s and contestants were expected to provide proof of their heritage (Banet-Weiser). The first time any blacks appeared in the pageant at all was in the 1920s and they were not actual contestants but performed in musical numbers as slaves. As seen, the pageant has a bad track record when it comes to welcoming diversity and so it has made an effort to include minorities, specifically black women. However the problem is that even though black women are now included, and even make it to the final rounds, contestants view “the crowning of an African American woman as a purely ‘political’ matter” while the crowning of white women is attributed “to the women’s genuine, natural, self-evident beauty” (Banet-Weiser 127). A black contestant’s place is often demeaned, as if she is only on the stage to meet a quota and is not as deserving as her white counterparts who actually earned their place there.

The idea of affirmative action has penetrated the pageant and black women’s merits are belittled and they are expected to represent their “race.” In the pageant, black women are thought to represent their blackness that when used in mass media tends to signify “not only welfare dependence, crack cocaine addicted mothers, and shady characters, but also wantonness, sexual abandon, and indiscriminate promiscuity” (Banet-Weiser 129). These are all negative stereotypes attached to blacks in the United States and when audiences see black contestants, their minds tend to tie the women to these

negative characteristics. The Miss America Pageant's relationship with black women is clearly very tumultuous. It excluded black women for fifty years and even when it did crown a black winner, the Miss America Organization pressured her to step down given the discovery of promiscuous pictures of her. Williams, during her reign, tried to draw attention to her merits instead of her race as an identity. The discussion of her being "colorless" is very interesting because it has a fundamental flaw. There is often outcry from white populations "about nonwhites and other groups who identify in terms of ethnicity and feel a need to identify themselves as 'different'" because they expect all people to just act "normally" (Banet-Weiser 133). However, the fact is nonwhites are expected to act "like people" which in the United States means acting "like white people," making white the normative standard (Banet-Weiser 133). In and out of the pageant, white is the norm, whether it is the color of Cinderella's skin or the color of Miss America 2013 (yes she was white with blonde hair).

Globalizing Beauty

The popular ideal of white as beautiful is one that not only thrives in the United States, but throughout the world. This universal idea of what constitutes beauty exists partially as a result of globalization. Before countries began exporting their beauty products, there was no global beauty, no singular accepted ideal (G. Jones, "Globalization and Beauty"). What was considered beautiful was determined by local societies that had their own methods for determining beauty. However, the more the beauty industry grew on an international level, the more homogenized beauty ideals became. Historically, "in the case of beauty, France, and in particular Paris, became the symbolic capital, joined much later by New York" (G. Jones, "Globalization and Beauty" 892). In the early days

of advertising and branding, beauty also became synonymous with whiteness, most clearly seen in soap advertisements in which the West civilized its colonized people (G. Jones, “Globalization and Beauty”). One soap slogan even claimed the ability to turn a “negro” white. In fact, the beauty industry as a whole made no effort to cater to the needs of African Americans in the early 1900s until Annie Turnbo Malone and Madam C.J. Walker “built large businesses concerned with the treatment of African-American hair” (G. Jones, “Globalization and Beauty” 892). Given the fact that blacks were excluded from the beauty industry until *black* women created their own products indicates that they were excluded from the common beauty ideal. White was seen as normal and therefore blacks were abnormal, not to be catered to by beauty firms.

It is important to understand that while beauty companies drove the globalization of beauty ideals, they did not truly create beauty ideals. Instead these companies interpreted what their society valued on an ethnic and cultural level and exploited these values to make a profit (G. Jones, “Globalization and Beauty”). As a result of the globalization of beauty products, countries outside of the West let their local ideals become “white washed,” and their aspirations of beauty began to mimic the West’s. With the rise of television, the globalization of beauty was intensified when the British-based Miss World and US-based Miss Universe aired in the early 1950s (G. Jones, “Globalization and Beauty”). Anyone in the world with a television could gaze up at the parade of white beauties that looked like the princesses from storybooks. With these media, “the paler skins and wider eyes favored in both these contests for the first few decades represented what has been termed a ‘Miss Universe standard of beauty’” (G. Jones, “Globalization and Beauty” 895). Based on this research, the “universal” standard

of beauty was rooted in white beauty, specifically fair skin and round eyes. With the spread of Western media to the world, the world's concept of beauty became more homogenized and resembled a white middle-class woman.

Specifically, the Miss America Pageant only allowed white contestants until the late 1960s, with the first black winner taking the crown in 1984 (G. Jones, "Blonde and blue-eyed"). Though just being white does not classify a woman as ideally beautiful. In fact, since the Miss America Pageant's conception in 1921, "over one-third of contestants have been blonde" (G. Jones, "Blonde and blue-eyed" 132). It is common knowledge that blonde hair is a recessive trait, one that is exclusively found in Caucasians. By defining beauty as being blonde in the Miss America Pageant, the trend of the pageant sends a message to women outside of this group that they are not traditionally beautiful. Black women, Asian women, Latina women, etc., are unable to relate to the contestants and therefore feel like their own looks are not considered beautiful or pageant worthy. This same beauty ideal was also reflected in Mattel's famous gal, Barbie. Created in the late 1950s, Barbie dolls "were blue-eyed and (predominantly) blonde until 1980" (G. Jones, "Blonde and blue-eyed" 132). This same ideal was echoed in Hollywood media with the popularity of actress Marilyn Monroe in the movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (G. Jones, "Blonde and blue-eyed"). Whether in the movies or aisles in a toy store, blonde and blue eyes were sold to the public as intricate the ideal look, the winning beauty. As the monumental World Wars sparked interactions between many countries, the influence of local beauty ideals spread.

Hollywood was especially popular on a global level, lending the United States credibility as a source to look to (G. Jones, "Blonde and blue-eyed"). Other countries

were able to watch American films in order to learn about the culture and beauty ideals of the United States. After the war, “US firms were strongly inclined to regard American beauty ideals as universal” (G. Jones, “Blonde and blue-eyed” 141). When cosmetics companies went into other countries to advertise, they sold the American ideal, the American image, one that looked like its blonde and blue-eyed Barbie dolls and Miss America contestants. With the US acting as a source of knowledge, other countries began to “Americanize” their unique concepts of beauty. Many scholars point to beauty brands “using aspirational images, including Hollywood stars and ‘blonde and blue-eyed’ models” as contributors “to the diffusion of western, or American, beauty ideals at the expense of local discourses” (G. Jones, “Blonde and blue-eyed” 144). It is important to look at what happened to these “local discourses” or local beauty ideals. As American businesses boomed, companies dispersed messages of American beauty that other countries should emulate. This emulation came with a price, the price of local communities’ own unique beauty concepts. As a result, many women in developing countries aspired to look like the white women in beauty ads, for this had to be what beauty was right? For women in countries in Latin America or Asia, they saw powerful images of large blue-eyed women and realized how they did not match these images, how their own ethnic and cultural looks fell short of this ideal. While this was the global repercussion, the United States itself was simultaneously full of black women who also looked nothing like the white, blonde, blue-eyed models marketing makeup and perfume. The repeated imagery of a blonde blue-eyed woman in beauty firms’ advertising taught women around the world that there was one beauty, one homogenized, Americanized beauty.

Despite the participation of more diverse contestants, the Miss America Pageant still judges women based on the parameters of white femininity while excluding the celebration of cultural identities (Hoad). Though the Miss America Pageant forces women to live up to one image of beauty in the United States, it seems fairly insignificant when juxtaposed with Miss World. The Miss World Pageant is international, including women of all races yet complicating the representation of race and culture. One can learn a great deal about homogenized beauty by observing the winners of Miss World. Just a “glance at 50 plus Miss Worlds reveals that culturally sanctioned current white ideals prevail, even though many of the Miss Worlds fall into other racial classifications” (Hoad 74). Evidence shows that homogenized beauty ideals reflect that of a white woman, so even when a Miss World is not white, she still resembles this “white” beauty image. She always tends to have light skin, straight never nappy hair, and be thin and tall (Hoad). In the context of Miss World, Hoad says “you will win or lose the title by how sexy, in terms of modern white, Western norms, you can look” (74). Even with a diverse group of women competing from all over the world, they are judged and made to fit the white, westernized mold. That is why the winners who are not white appear to resemble white women with silky hair or lighter skin. In this way, Miss World demonstrates the detriments of declaring one beauty the winner throughout the world; all women are made to strive to this one look when women come in all shapes, colors, sizes, and figures. The restrictions that come with picking one beauty have damaging repercussions for women around the world.

Nigeria is a case study where the effects of homogenized beauty have taken a clear toll. Historically, Nigeria participated in Miss World for years with its contestants

receiving low marks (Onishi). All the contestants representing Nigeria had been winners in the country's Most Beautiful Girl pageant and were considered traditionally beautiful by Nigerian standards (Onishi). But in the year 2000, the executive director of the Most Beautiful Girl contest changed everything. He knew that "black African women had little chance of winning an international competition in a world dominated by Western beauty ideals," so he told the judges "not to look for a local queen," but someone to represent Nigeria on the international stage (Onishi A4). Guy Murray-Bruce's conversation with judges teaches an important lesson; it shows that Nigerian beauty was in clear conflict with the Western beauty. Nigerian women who did not look "western" never succeeded in the pageant, however the winner in Nigeria in 2001 went on to win the entire Miss World Pageant (Onishi). While this moment was a source of great joy and pride for a country typically riddled with corruption, the winner herself did not look "Nigerian" (Onishi). This win felt hollow for a critical reason:

In a culture where Coca-Cola-bottle voluptuousness is celebrated and ample backsides and bosoms are considered ideals of female beauty, the new Miss World shared none of those attributes. She was 6 feet tall, stately and so, so skinny. She was, some said uncharitably, a white girl in black skin. (Onishi A4)

In fact, many older Nigerian women found the winner, Agbani Darego, to be unattractive while the younger generation valued her thinness (Onishi). Her win is a demonstration of a country caught between its own local beauty ideal and that of the West that is constantly pushed upon the world's women. It seems mindboggling that in a country where brides go to fattening farms before their weddings, thinness is the trend, and movies cast girls who try to be slim as a dollar bill (Onishi). Darego's win has

sparked a change in beauty ideals in Africa that favors thin over curvy, overturning years of tradition and culture in the region. This is just one of many examples in which Western beauty has negatively changed African beauty ideals. While Nigerians want to change the shape of their bodies, women in South Asia try to change their skin.

Skin lightening creams have become a widespread phenomenon in South Asia where white skin has a deeply historical connection to superiority and power (Shankar, Giri, and Palaian). The craving for fair skin is a recent trend, one that has grown in the past 50 years as cosmetic companies advertise skin bleaching. In fact, Indian and South Asian companies in the cosmetics industry draw 40% of their profits from fairness creams (Shankar, Giri, and Palaian). This number is alarming because out of all the beauty products on the market, women seem to swarm to fairness creams, trying to bleach themselves into power. In the East, whiteness is tied to superiority so the whiter one appears, the better she is. This belief combined with a pale skinned global entertainment industry has contributed to a whiter international beauty ideal, evidenced by “extraordinarily tall and breathtakingly slim” beauty pageant winners in India with “light honey-colored skin” (Shankar, Giri, and Palaian 1187). Scholars have deemed the cause of this tendency “disease mongering,” meaning a manipulation of fear regarding the inferiority of one’s race on a scientific level (Shankar, Giri, and Palaian).

Fairness creams are tied to disease mongering because they promote the idea that one body image or color is better than another, and companies sell products to help people achieve the ideal (Shankar, Giri, and Palaian). This entire situation of skin lightening comes full circle back to pageants, because fairness cream manufacturers themselves sponsor beauty pageants in order to garner publicity for their products

(Shankar, Giri, and Palaian). It is almost too perfect; if one lightens her skin enough, perhaps she can win the beauty pageant. Once again, women are put on a stage to compete against one another, but changing the color of one's skin seems mandatory in order to even participate. If one is not white enough, why should she even bother trying to compete in a beauty pageant? Because at the end of the day, in these societies, white is what is beautiful, it was what women strive to achieve. Fairness creams, through pageants, teach that white is the preferred beauty. Changing one's skin to match popular beauty ideals is drastic, similar to drastically changing one's body through plastic surgery.

While older Chinese generations, those who lived during Mao's reign, would never have considered cosmetic surgery, younger women find themselves swept up in the consumer revolution. In the late 1970s, China opened up to more foreign influence after economic reform and policy changes (Luo). Consumerism seeped into the lifestyles of the Chinese, and women especially began purchasing luxury brand clothing, cosmetics, and jewelry. "Women's growth in China's consumer bloom is inevitably intertwined with intensifying torrents of globalization in the post-Mao era, which entails not only selling local and global commodities but also disseminating symbolic images and ideas through the media" (Luo 69). With the introduction of new ideas and behaviors, China welcomed in many different images from the media, one being western beauty. Many critics of plastic surgery argue that women risk their health believing that surgical procedures will improve their appearances. For Asian women, they often seek surgery to change the shapes of their eyes and noses (Luo). The key here is that Asian women alter their facial structure, but alter them to look like what? Today's beauty ideals normalize Caucasian

features and make them the standard for beauty; therefore plastic surgery in Asia mimics the “white look” (Luo). In China, plastic surgery re-defines “standards of beauty” and inscribes “those standards onto the defective ‘natural’ bodies of women who failed to resemble...the norm” (Luo 71). This is a disturbing tendency because popular beauty ideals label the natural bodies of Asian women as failures. Women who do not resemble Western beauty consider their bodies to be failures, and they try to repair themselves through surgery. Plastic surgery itself commodifies women’s bodies, making their eyes, noses, chins, breasts, lips, cheeks, ears, etc. into products that can be altered. Getting cosmetic surgery today is like a woman taking her nose to a shop and exchanging it for a new one; in all cases, women’s unique inborn beauty is changed out for whatever is the popular model of the time.

Pageants of the East

India has recently stepped into the realm of “developed” countries; despite having a large portion of its population living in poverty, the country’s economy has swelled to a substantial size. Through capitalism and consumerism, India claimed membership to the international scene in recent years (Ahmed-Ghosh). This achievement was made abundantly clear when in 2000, “Miss Indias walked away with the triple honors of Miss World, Miss Universe, and Miss Asia-Pacific” (Ahmed-Ghosh 205). These wins were positive for the role of women in India because they helped negotiate a newer, more modern, standard for women to live up to. Despite having historically patriarchal practices, India honors its beauty queens as it does its soldiers and cricket players (Ahmed-Ghosh). Beauty queens hold such importance to the country and its people because they are the vehicles for delivering a message to the rest of the world, and that

message is that India has arrived (Ahmed-Ghosh). However, it has become a juggling act because while India tries to boast its modernity, its right-wing constituents pull the country back to its family values. They believe that Indian women should be wives and mothers, devoted to the care of service of men. Within India there is a paradox; beauty queens and modern women move India up in the world while they are accused of leaving behind the moral and traditional parts of Indian culture.

At a time of transition in India, beauty queens illustrate a fantasy of the culture: social mobility (Parameswaran). At times when bad news seems unyielding, stories of drought and famine, there are beauty queens to offer good news. Beauty queens from India are a great source of pride, and the more they win at international pageants, the more recognition they can bring to Indian beauty. The Indian beauty queen is an interesting mix, or hybrid, and her identity illustrates “how the global consolidates its hegemony through symbols of the national and the national reconfigures its legitimacy through assertions of superiority in the global marketplace” (Parameswaran 362). The national beauty queens are seen as role models, exemplary women who bring India glory and recognition. At the same time, they are “clad in the ‘bold’ glamour of upper class Western femininity and gleaming tiaras” (Parameswaran 362). It seems paradoxical, but Indian women who take up conventional Western beauty ideals and traditions are seen as representing India well on the world stage. In the past decades, Indian women have fared very well at international pageants, with many contestants in the top ten, eventually leading to the Miss Universe crown in 1994 (Parameswaran). Indian beauty queens truly are amalgams because the country takes great pride and ownership in its winners, but the winners resemble the popular western ideals rather than unique local ones.

Despite India's joy in its successful beauty queens, Indian citizens in poverty struggle for food, shelter, or water. While they suffer, "globalization's ideologies of prosperity in India offer no recourse for the vast majority of poor citizens to attain even the humble ordinariness of the middle class consumer who desires the status of the global beauty queen" (Parameswaran 367). While the middle class clambers to buy beauty products, to look and act like a beauty queen, there are members in their same society who are starving or homeless. India's income gap makes pageantry seem out of place, and is evidence of its existence as a hybrid; it so badly wants to appear civilized, and established like a Western country, yet it is trying to move forward despite leaving part of its population behind. Beauty pageants in India may provide feelings of worthiness and self-importance for the people, but they cause the obscuration of those too poor to participate in them. Indian beauty pageants are an example of western influence penetrating a culturally different society, and adapting its values to follow the popular model. While Indian beauty pageants seem to counter years of traditions, so too do Islamic pageants.

In the Middle East, Islamic beauty pageants are nowhere near as sexualized as the Miss America Pageant. Instead of picking its winner based on her looks, the "Iqraa Beauty Queen" is chosen based on her ability to highlight "the ideal image of the Muslim woman as a selfless, obedient daughter" (Galal 159). Although a beauty pageant may seem to go against many of Islam's teachings, the criteria by which women are judged seems to uphold the idea that women are subservient to men; the women do not receive praise based on their own ideas or talents or community involvement, but rather how well they serve others and obey. Despite denying the temptation to adapt its culture to Western

ideals, the Iqraa Beauty Queen is not someone to be praised because of her obedience to patriarchy.

Miss China Europe is another pageant, though it is hard to know if one could call it a pageant of the East or West. Organized for the women of the Chinese diaspora, the pageant takes place in the Netherlands and it is for Chinese born women who have grown up in Europe (Chow). The pageant itself is a jumping off point for discussions surrounding “ethnicity, race, (trans)nationality, and cultural belonging” (Chow 413). The researcher who looked at Miss China Europe chose not to analyze patriarchal influences or oppression in the pageant because his focus was instead about culture. Despite this, he discusses many pageant traits like the qualifying rules. As of 2006, a contestant must be “female; not married and pregnant before; aged between 18-26; no criminal records; have the right travel documents and permits; have resided in Europe for a minimum of six months” (Chow 417). In this laundry list, influences of Miss America can be seen in the rules regarding the contestants’ marital status and health history. Miss China Europe bases its rules on those written for the Miss America Pageant long ago, showing that even a pageant, which is supposed to be transnational, is influenced by the American or Western way of life.

“Powwow” Princesses

Surprisingly, beauty contests in non-Western cultures seem to be more progressive despite not fitting into the normative white group which often thinks of itself as the most advanced. In her study of Native American reservations of the Plains, Kathleen Glenister Roberts studies the identity of “powwow princesses” among their communities. The powwow princesses later compete in Miss Indian World that differs

from the Miss America competition because powwow princesses “do not need to qualify through any local or regional stages of competition. It is open to anyone who wishes to enter and who meets specific qualifications” (Roberts 264). Some scholars argue that powwow princesses combine popular western culture with their own tradition in order to reflect their modern and distinct way of life (Kozol). Although both the Miss Indian World and the Miss America Pageant have young women meeting qualifications in order to compete with one another for a title, they are inherently different.

Beauty in the Miss America Pageant is measure by a woman’s waist, hips, and breasts measurements (as well as how she looks in a swimsuit). But for the contestants in Miss Indian World, they are praised for exemplifying “the familial ‘beauty’ of the contest” (Roberts 267). The event has a completely different purpose from that of the pageant because it is not about finding an ideal representation of beauty. Instead, the “event’s organizers view the role of Miss Indian World as, above all, representing and conveying the traditions of her people” (Roberts 268). Native Americans’ ideal princess is very different from the Western Culture princess who is portrayed as passive and dependent. The powwow princess is strong and very in tune with her culture, dissimilar to the way culture is phased out and contestants are homogenized in the Miss America Pageant. It was in 1954 that the first Miss Indian America contest took place, starting a legacy of tradition (Kozol). Within a few short years, “by the 1960s, tribes, powwows, and rodeos all sponsored beauty pageants, many of which continue today” (Kozol 75).

Despite the fact that pageants are not rooted in Native American culture, parents of many girls enter their daughters into the Indian Princess contests (Thompson). In order to be a competitive contestant, women must be educated and well spoken. Most

importantly though, contestants must have a deep understanding of the tribal traditions the elders teach (Thompson). When a woman wins the contest and becomes “princess,” she takes on new responsibilities. She helps the powwow committee with “food preparation, serving, and cleanup; ensuring the elders are comfortable; being a positive role model for her peers both in moral behavior and in preserving culture... and representing Indian people in general” (Thompson 5). Unlike a Miss America winner, an Indian Princess has duties that are focused on benefitting the community as a whole as opposed to making public appearances and personal platforms.

While pageants are inherently full of judgment, Indian pageants judge contestants using unique criteria. A woman is judged on “cultural knowledge including language, and arts,” “participation or service in cultural events,” “assembling and using a regionally authentic outfit,” “community involvement,” “poise under pressure,” and “academic achievement” (Thompson 6). Unlike traditional western beauty pageants, Indian Princess contests judge contestants on the life they lead rather than their looks or talents. Additionally, the Indian Princess differs in that her reign is a lifetime; she does not retire when a newer younger princess wins. All Indian Princesses are expected to maintain their fruitful lives and continue setting examples as role models.

Conclusion

Despite the existence of uniquely different pageants both abroad and within the United States, pageantry, specifically Miss America who started it all, is detrimental to women by normalizing patriarchy and submission. After analyzing the pageant on a superficial level, it may seem like a good thing. There are many winners who have

moving platforms, and they draw the public's attention to issues that might have otherwise gone ignored. And for the women who live in areas of the country where women are made to feel subservient to men, the pageant lifts their spirits showing them more than 50 independent free-thinking women. On the surface, the pageant seems just lovely. What could be better than doling out scholarships to many young women so they can make something of themselves? As soon as one stops listening to what the pageant *says* it does and actually analyzes the repercussions of and messages embedded in the pageant's actions, it becomes easy to see the harm it causes.

The idea of objectification is the most obvious critique because it is so outwardly overt in the Miss America Pageant. The various outfits the women wear are designed to show off their large breasts and toned six packs. During the swimsuit portion, women parade out in bikinis and heels, yes high heels. It is fair to say that at a beach or pool, or any place where women wear bikinis, they do not wear high heels there. The footwear choice alone exists to accentuate and draw attention to the long lanky legs of contests, to make the muscles in their legs and buttocks flex as they strut down the runway. The contestants receive scores for this portion of the pageant, as they do for the formalwear portion as well. But how do you score someone for wearing a swimsuit? The same goes for a ball gown; there is no *wrong* way to wear a dress, so how do you judge a woman in a dress? The only answer is to judge her based on how she looks in it. In sections of the pageant where the contestants do not speak but simply fashion dresses and swimsuits, it is implied that the judges base their scores on how contestants' bodies look. The women who participate are like objects on stage, like goods to be sold at an auction. They are not celebrated for their strength or personalities, but rather their bodies and appearance. The

judging of women in this sense takes them from being freethinking individuals to breasts and legs to judge. Oftentimes young girls see the pageant and look to the contestants as examples and role models. Young generations of girls in America idolize women who use their bodies and good looks to get ahead in life and go on to imitate them. At the end of the day, contestants use their looks and attractiveness to win money and better their lives. The pattern of girls using their appearance to meet their goals is a dangerous behavior because it keeps women from striving for their full potential the same way men do; instead of using intellect or problem solving, girls are invited to use their sexuality to succeed. The pageant produces objectified contestants for girls to look up to, but it also upholds myths that contribute to the stifling of girls' potential.

Inevitably, women identify with both the judges and contestants; they compare themselves to the contestants and simultaneously judge their own bodies. A multitude of factors affect the criteria women use to judge themselves and others, and myths and fairy tales are two major influencers on the criteria or standards women set for themselves. The Miss America Pageant negatively affects women in the United States because it constructs a very limited gender role that praises passivity and beauty. It teaches that women should be passive, waiting for a man to lift them out of obscurity. The pageant also teaches that those who are beautiful are successful, whether it is in the pageant or in a fairy tale. Princesses like Cinderella depend on their beauty to lure men in to better their lives. The princess myth causes girls to hide their true personalities in order to appear perfect, which in today's society means having no voice or opinions. The contestants on stage live the perfect girl myth because they strive to appear flawless and to win based on the fact that they demonstrate perfection. This myth is terrible because it suppresses

women's thoughts causing them to mask their true feelings in order to meet an image conjured and endorsed by the Miss America Organization. But the princess myth is even more detrimental to women of color because it excludes them from being beautiful and princess-like.

When examining the pageant's history, one can learn that black is not considered beautiful while blonde and blue-eyed beauty queens reign supreme. Women of color were historically excluded from the pageant and even when they were finally included, audiences found their presence on stage to be purely political; meaning that people did not actually consider the black women beautiful, they were just there so the pageant could be politically correct. Audiences saw their presence as evidence of affirmative action; black women were not really beautiful or talented but were there to simply fill a quota and make the MAO look diverse. Some people even believed that the women didn't deserve to be there at all unlike white women who are traditionally beautiful and earned their places on stage. In fact, during the 1990s, public discourse centered itself around the discrimination of whites based on race and there was an "increase in the number of charges of 'reverse racism,' where whites claimed to be unfairly judged because of minority presence" (Banet-Weiser "Miss America" 78). The beauty ideal that is forged by princess myths and lived by the objectified contestants on stage excludes black women sending the message that black is in fact *not* beautiful. The fact that black women are not viewed as equals in the pageant is evidence that selecting one beauty has been detrimental for a specific racial group. A similar issue arises on the global pageant stage as well.

The Miss America Organization runs Miss America, Donald Trump runs Miss Universe, and the same European family has run Miss World since 1951 (Judkis). Miss World and Miss Universe are both international pageants, however Miss World is an older more serious pageant with more prestige. While all these pageants may seem similar, they are unrelated on a physical level; the contestants and owners do not overlap. Different networks and cable channels air the different pageants. What these pageants *do* have in common is their effect on beauty ideals on an international scale, selling the same carbon copy image of what a beautiful woman looks like.

Contests like Miss World show how selecting one winner to represent the world's most beautiful woman has homogenized beauty ideals. Comparing various countries, cultures, and women, international pageants inherently say that one type of look or appearance is better than others. Based on the winners of Miss World, the type of look the pageant celebrates is a "white" western look. The repercussions of this beauty image being crowned the greatest in the world are that people who do not fit this mold are changing their bodies to match it. Whether it is women in South East Asia lightening their skin, or women in Africa dropping weight, all over the world women feel pressure to look a certain way, the *same* way. Combined, these different elements are intertwined and combine to make a cocktail of destructive expectations for women. The contestants act as role models for women who want to be "perfect" and objectify themselves to do so. Black women can do both of these things and still never truly be considered beautiful by society, while women all over the world manipulate their bodies striving for this one idea of beauty.

Significance

My findings in this essay are significant because while scholars pick different aspects of the pageant to critique and look at, they do not connect different problems of the pageant together. It is important to make concessions by looking at positive outcomes of the pageant, but the objectification of women and the exclusion of minority women from beauty ideals are important to address and relate, as they both fall under princess myths endorsed by the pageant. Lastly, one must look at the Miss America Pageant from an international lens, observing the repercussions on a global scale. These patterns and relationships are extremely important to note because the effects of the pageant continue to affect young girls all over the world every day. How do girls in Korea feel about themselves when they are slicing their eyelids in half to look whiter? What do we tell girls whose waist-to-hip ratio falls outside of what has been deemed beautiful? What if girls from male-dominated neighborhoods didn't have Miss America to look to at all? If women are taught that they should be quiet and passive to be loved, how are women ever supposed to be equal to men? If little girls learn that they should let men rescue them and that a makeover will solve their problems, how can we expect women to be strong, independent thinkers? I personally loved princess stories as a child, but I am able to make the distinction between fantasy and reality. I am able to admire the fantasy of these stories, but that is what they are: fantasy. Some fail to see these stories as fantasy and allow their lessons to permeate their way of thinking. Girls who live by princess myths are set up to live inferior to and dependent on men. This research is significant not only because women are learning to be second-class citizens to men, but also because women all over the world are looking to one example of beauty. Abroad and at home, women

feel they do not match up with the images they see on television and in the media, and as a result, their body image and satisfaction is distorted. Maybe if there were no televised beauty contests in which women's bodies were judged and rated, then women would not feel the need to seek out plastic surgery or eating disorders.

Limitations

My research was limited by the fact that not many articles were written about the pageant in recent years. There was an abundance of scholarly articles and books in the nineties because of the scandals that occurred in the 1980s, but as far as the 2000s go, the pageant has kept a lower profile in comparison. In general, scholars tend to overlook the pageant as “fluff,” and not worthy of their time, limiting the amount of voices and opinions written. My research was limited because I would have liked to learn more about the contestants themselves and what their stories are, but because there are so many contestants every year, their individuality is lost in a sea of beautiful women who all seem to look the same. By picking a few of the success stories, I tried to paint a picture of what some winners are like and what their potential is like. However, it is impossible to represent all winners fairly or accurately because they are all so different, so this acts as a limitation as well.

Future Research

For future research I would like to see studies on who actually attends the pageants, that is, who makes up the audience at the physical event. I would also like research to look at what advertisements air during the pageant because the ads will

indicate if businesses think men or women are watching, as well as the speculated ages of viewers. It would also be fascinating for there to be a psychological study in which women are exposed to footage of the Miss America Pageant. There would be a pretest to observe their body satisfaction before exposure, and then a test to measure their body satisfaction after. This would especially be interesting with subjects who are not white. It would also be interesting to see how the pageant psychologically affects men's conception of beauty in women. Other research on a global level could be to look at countries in Asia and Africa that have beauty contests and compare them to countries that do not. While many countries participate in Miss World and Miss Universe, what about the countries that don't? Are their beauty ideals still relevant to the region's culture or have they been homogenized to western ideals? A final aspect for future research to look at is the relevance of Miss America today. Today there is Miss USA, Miss World, Miss Universe, and Miss America. Who holds the most sway? And does the public really care about these figures anymore? These are the questions I would like to see answered by future research.

Bibliography

- "50 Years of Black Beauty Queens." *Ebony* 51.1 (Nov 1995): 206. Print.
- Ahmed-ghosh, Huma. "Writing the Nation on the Beauty Queen's Body: Implications for a 'Hindu' Nation." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 4.1 (2003): 205-27. Print.
- American Experience: Miss America*. PBS/WGBH, 2002. Web.
- Anuakan, Iset. "Princess Literature and the Miss America Pageant." *There She Is, Miss America*. Ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 111-124. Print.
- Ashmore, Richard D., Basil G. Englis, and Michael R. Solomon. "Beauty before the Eyes of Beholders: The Cultural Encoding of Beauty Types in Magazine Advertising and Music Television." *Journal of Advertising* 23.2 (June 1994): 49-65. Print.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. "Miss America, National Identity, and the Identity Politics of Whiteness." *There She Is, Miss America*. Ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 67-89. Print.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1999.
- Callahan, Michael. "The Battle for Miss America's Soul." *Good Housekeeping* 231.4 (Oct 2000): 178. Print.
- Collins, Helen. "Miss America's an R.N. Will it make a Difference?" *RN* 50.12 (1987): 35-38. Print.
- Cottle, Michelle. "You've Come a Long Way, Maybe: JonBenet, Diana, the Princess Fantasy, and what it has done to Women." *Washington Monthly* 29.11 (1997): 20-25. Print.
- Dow, Bonnie J. "Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6.1 (2003): 127-49. Print.
- Ducille, Ann. "Dyes and Dolls: Multicultural Barbie and the Merchandising of Difference." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6.1 (1994): 46-69. Print.
- Frabotta, David. "Former Miss America Promotes Community Involvement, Diversity: Does the Face of the Profession Mirror the Pet-Owning Public?" *DVM Newsmagazine* 36.9 (Sept 2005): 12. Print.
- Freese, Jeremy, and Sheri Meland. "Seven Tenths Incorrect: Heterogeneity and Change in the Waist-to-Hip Ratios of Playboy Centerfold Models and Miss America

- Pageant Winners." *The Journal of Sex Research* 39.2 (May 2002): 133-139. Print.
- Fullilove, Michael. "Palin and the Beauty Queen are Spookily Similar." *The Financial Times* 19 Nov 2009: 11. Print.
- Galal, Ehab. "The Muslim Woman as a Beauty Queen." *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 3.3 (2010): 159-75. Print.
- Giri, Bishnu Rath, Subish Palaian, and P. R. Shankar. "Fairness Creams in South Asia--a Case of Disease Mongering?" *PLoS Medicine* 3.2 (2006): 1187+. Print.
- Grabe, Shelly, L. Monique Ward, and Janet Shibley Hyde. "The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns among Women: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies." *Psychological bulletin* 134.3 (2008): 460-76. Print.
- Hamlin, Kimberley A. "Bathing Suits and Backlash." *There She Is, Miss America*. Ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 27-51. Print.
- Henke, Jill Birnie, Diane Zimmerman Umble, Nancy J. Smith. "Construction of the Female Self: Feminist Readings of the Disney Heroine." *Women's Studies in Communication* Vol. 19 Issue 2 (Summer 1996): 229-249
- Hoad, Neville. "World Piece: What the Miss World Pageant Can Teach about Globalization." *Cultural Critique* 58.1 (2004): 56-81. Print.
- Jones, Geoffrey. "Blonde and Blue-Eyed? Globalizing Beauty, c.1945– c.1980." *Economic History Review* 61.1 (Feb 2008): 125-54. Print.
- Jones, Geoffrey. "Globalization and Beauty: A Historical and Firm Perspective." *EurAmerica* 41.4 (2011): 885-917. Print.
- Jones, Jennifer. "The Beauty Queen as Deified Sacrificial Victim." *Theatre History Studies* 18 (1998): 99-106. Print.
- Judkis, Maura. "Miss World Pageant: What in the world is it?" *Washington Post* 17 August 2012. Web.
- Kinloch, Valerie Felita. "The Rhetoric of Black Bodies: Race, Beauty, and Representation." *There She Is, Miss America*. Ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 93-109. Print.
- Kozol, Wendy. "Miss Indian America: Regulatory Gazes and the Politics of Affiliation." *Feminist Studies* 31.1 (2005): 64-94. Print.
- Luo, Wei. "Selling Cosmetic Surgery and Beauty Ideals: The Female Body in the Web Sites of Chinese Hospitals." *Women's Studies in Communication* 35.1 (2012): 68-95. Print.

- Miss America Organization. <http://www.missamerica.org/competition-info/faq.aspx>
- Modesti, Sonja. "Contextually Reconstructing Miss America: Utilizing Blended Methods to Critique the Oratory of Pageant Titleholders." *Communication Studies* 62.2 (2011): 224-38. Print.
- Morry, Marian M., and Sandra L. Staska. "Magazine Exposure: Internalization, Self-Objectification, Eating Attitudes, and Body Satisfaction in Male and Female University Students." *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 33.4 (2001): 269-79. Print.
- Neimark, Jill. "Why we Need Miss America." *Psychology Today* 31.5 (Sept 1998): 40-46. Print.
- Parameswaran, Radhika. "Global Queens, National Celebrities: Tales of Feminine Triumph in Post-Liberalization India." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21.4 (2004): 346-70. Print.
- Riverol, A.R. Live from Atlantic City: The History of the Miss America Pageant Before, After and in Spite of Television. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992.
- Riverol, A.R. "Myth America and Other Misses: A Second Look at the American Beauty Contests." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* Vol. 40 Issue 2 (Summer 1983): 207-217
- Roberts, Kathleen Glenister. "Speech, Gender, and the Performance of Culture: Native American 'Princesses.'" *Text and Performance Quarterly* Vol. 22 Issue 4 (October 2002): 261-279
- Ruwe, Donelle R. "I Was Miss Meridian 1985: Sorophobia, Kitsch, and Local Pageantry." *There She Is, Miss America*. Ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 137-152. Print.
- Singh, Devendra. "Adaptive Significance of Female Physical Attractiveness: Role of Waist-to-Hip Ratio." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 65 Issue 2 (Aug 1993): 293-307
- Tonn, Mari Boor. "Miss America Contesters and Contestants: Discourse About Social 'Also-Rans.'" *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* Vol. 6 Issue 1 (Spring 2003): 150-160
- Watson, Elwood, and Darcy Martin. "The Miss America Pageant: Pluralism, Femininity, and Cinderella All in One." *Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 34 Issue 1 (2000): 105-126

Watson, Elwood, and Darcy Martin. 'There She Is, Miss America': The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America's Most Famous Pageant. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.

Weitz, Rose. "Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race by Maxine Leeds Craig." *American Journal of Sociology* 108.5 (2003): 1133-5. Print.

"What Can't a Beauty Queen Do?" *Slate*. The Slate Group, 27 May 1999. Web.

Zipp, Yvonne, and Stacy A. Teicher. "There She is, Miss ... Anachronism?" *The Christian Science Monitor* 17 September 1999: 1. Print.